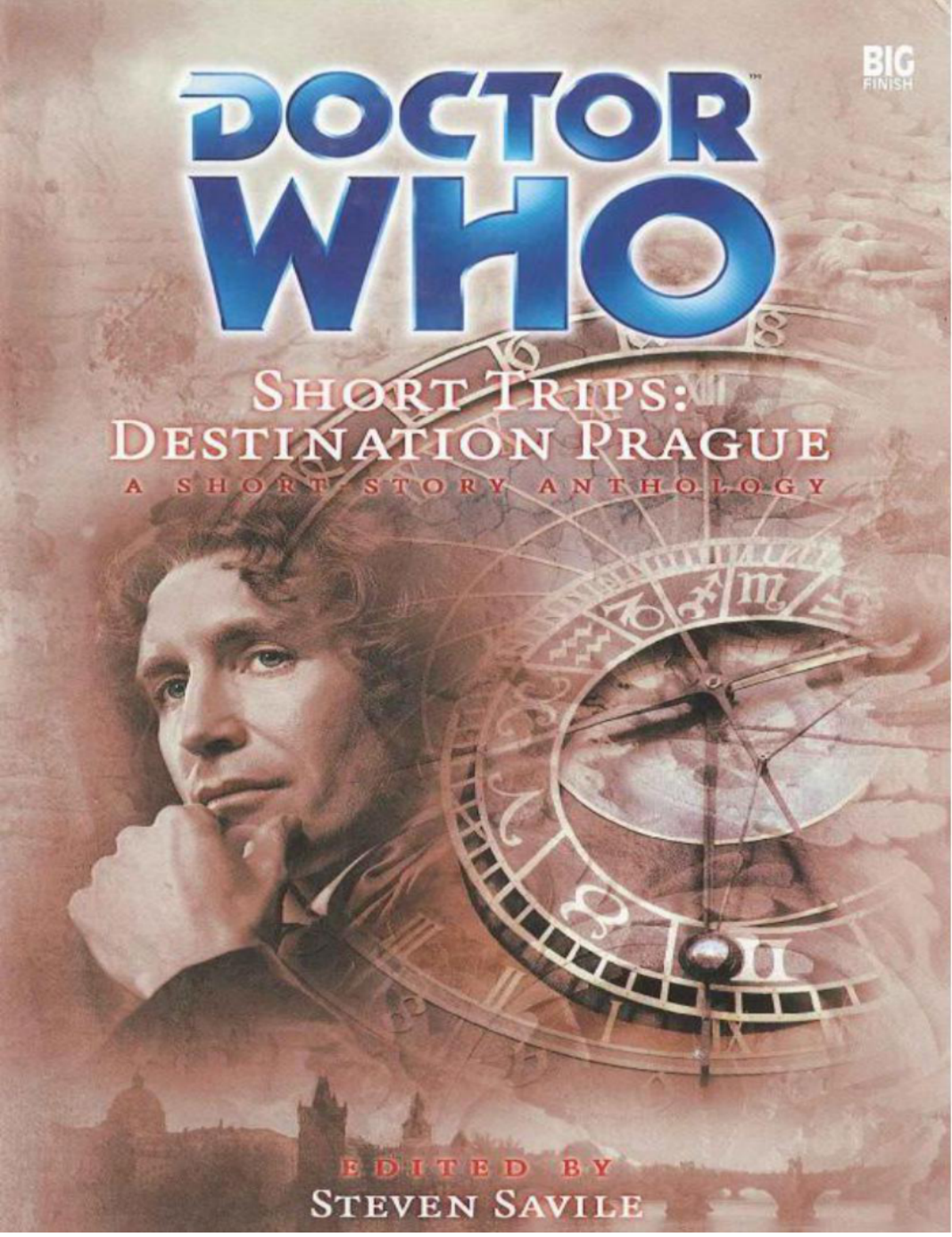
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: DESTINATION PRAGUE

A SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGY



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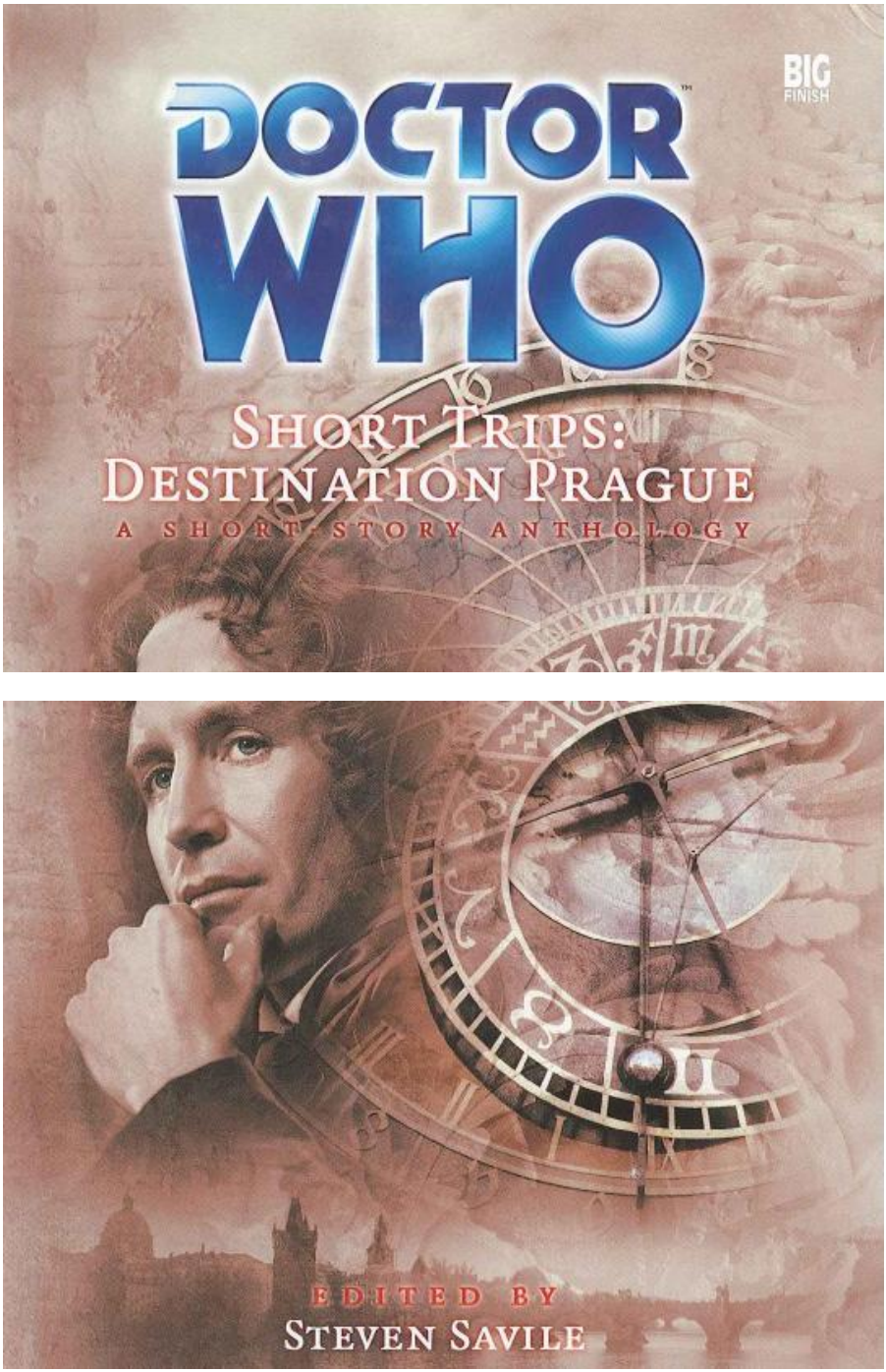
STEVEN SAVILE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A Short-Story Anthology

Edited by Steven Savile

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Room for Improvement © James A. Moore

Life From Lifelessness © Keith R. A. DeCandido

The Long Step Backward © Mike W. Barr

Strange Attractor © Paul Kupperberg

Gold and Black Ooze © Robert Hood

The Dogs of War © Brian Keene

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Sean Williams

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Midnight in the

Café of the Black Madonna

Sean Williams

An Adventure of the Third Doctor

The time had come to run, so that's exactly what Kan did. He ran down broad thoroughfares lined with inert vehicles, all four of his legs at full stretch. He galloped along lanes so narrow that his armour knocked holes in cornices and snapped metal lamp posts like saplings. He thundered across bridges, shaking loose centuries of accumulated bird droppings. He ran until the mighty bellows of his lungs burned and the very muscles that might deliver him to salvation threatened to melt.

The alarms grew louder behind him, audible through the sensitive tissues of his feet. His relatively fragile ears were folded flat against his head and neck. He held his nose upright in challenge, but saw no one on the shadowy streets. That was why he had chosen them. But still the subsonic clamour pursued him. No matter where he ran it came after him, as relentless as time — or guilt.

Doubt sapped the strength in his limbs. He could hear the gasping of his breath growing steadily more desperate. What if he had done the wrong thing? What if, for all his convictions, he had chosen the wrong

moment to act?

He took a corner clumsily and righted himself without falling, though it

cost him a jarred knee and strained spine. His combat armour asked him

again whether he wanted it to activate, to take some of the load his body

was enduring. He told it no. If he switched it on the others would know

where he was. They could freeze him solid in his artificial skeleton, like a

body in a coffin, ready for –

He skidded in alarm. Someone was standing in the street ahead. Not

one of his kind — two-legged like the Enemy but with only one set of

arms and eyes. It was turning to flee but Kan was moving too quickly,

with all his body's considerable momentum. It was too late to avoid a

collision.

With all the grace of an eight-ton ballet dancer, Kan leapt, scooped up

the creature between his right tusk and nose, and rolled. Tucking his

head down protectively, he ignored the pounding his body took as it

tumbled end over end. This punishment he could endure. He was not a

murderer, even an accidental one. He would not allow it.

They crashed to a halt against the side of a building, cracking

masonry and splintering beams. Windows shattered; thousands of silver

shards rained down on them both. Kan blinked and, groaning, strained to

right himself. The creature was still clutched to his chest, but it was no

longer moving. Its white hair puzzled him, and the strange clothes it

wore. So soft against the delicate nerves of his nose, so beautiful...

The throbbing of alarms, temporarily forgotten, rose up around him.

He could hear engines now as well as alarms, and the pounding of feet

growing nearer. Lights in the sky swooped over him, heavy aircraft riding

columns of swirling air. Kan hunched his shoulders and activated his

armour, prepared to fight now that all hope was lost.

‘Specialist Kandula!’ boomed a voice, and Kan felt his courage fail.

‘He’s over here, lads! Get a move on! We’ve not got all day, you know!’

Among the dozens of ground troops converging on the scene, one

Crei stood tallest and proudest. His epaulettes were wider, his tusks

longer and sharper. His ceremonial armour shone from extensive

polishing. The tip of his nose bobbed higher than any other.

Kan fought the inbred urge to submit to a superior and raised himself

up to full height. ‘Commander Ezrehard,’ he started to say, ‘there’s

something I must tell you.’

‘I can see it with my own eyes,’ trumpeted the commander as he

approached. ‘While we wasted time capturing the vehicle, you ran down

the one who arrived in it. Nicely done, my good fellow. Nicely done!

You’ve earned yourself another commendation.’

‘Vehic- uh, I have, sir?’

‘Yes, indeed. Aren’t you the one who pinpointed the collision in the first place? I believe I can find a new duty where your quick thinking can be put to even better use.’

‘A new duty, sir?’

‘If’ wanted an echo, Kandula, I’d talk into a well.’

The creature hanging limply from under Kan’s nose was taken from him by three specialists and carried away. Behind the commander, a rectangular blue box that he had never seen before stood on the back of a troop flatbed. The white-haired alien was carefully secured next to it.

‘Where did they come from, sir?’

‘That’s up to you to find out, *Sergeant* Kandula. Discover their secrets and further promotion awaits. I’m putting Squadron J at your full disposal.’ That was nearly enough to make Kan faint. He wasn’t to be blamed, court-martialled or shot. In fact, he had been promoted. What a strange shore fate had guided him to!

Somehow Kan managed to salute without keeling over. He sagged gratefully into his armour as the commander turned and marched away.

A dozen soldiers watched Kan with blank impassivity. Eventually he realised that they were waiting for him to give them an order.

‘To Science Section HQ’ he barked, waving his nose in a feeble imitation of Commander Ezrehard’s imperiousness. The flatbed

carrying

the alien and its strange artefact reversed and trundled off. Kan followed,

almost daring to think that his mission might not fail after all...

* * *

2

The Doctor's eyes flickered open. He had been dreaming about a

jungle, the Amazon perhaps, and woke with a nagging feeling that he

had lost something important. Something or someone...

His head was pounding, a feeling made only worse when he tried to

sit up. A thick strap across his chest kept him thoroughly immobile. He

could barely turn his head to look around.

He was lying in a very large tent, one filled with lights and equipment.

It didn't look like a prison. It more resembled a UNIT field tent, except the

scale was completely wrong. The ceiling hung at least four metres above

him, and the tools were much too heavy for a human to lift. He briefly

considered the possibility that he had shrunk while unconscious, but

dismissed it as unlikely.

The explanation lay to his right, where four elephants clad in high-

tech exoskeletons were probing the TARDIS with advanced sensors. A

series of irritated bleeps and buzzes indicated their lack of progress so

far.

From somewhere in the distance came the sound of crunching masonry. That, finally, revived the memory of how he had come to be there. Part of it, anyway. A young human girl called Jo and his need to go far away, very quickly...

'Excuse me,' he called. 'Might I have a word with someone in authority?'

The four elephants turned instantly to face him. Their movements were less ponderous than those of a terrestrial pachyderm, and a second glance revealed that, for all their superficial similarities, these were entirely different creatures, with four sensitive nodules on the end of each trunk, tusks carved to signal rank, and armour clearly assisting their movements. Tool-users, not zoo exhibits.

'I have authority here,' said one, shouldering forward. His trunk rose in a clear gesture of dominance. 'Identify yourself and explain your presence.'

'Well, I'm the Doctor,' he said. That was the easy part. 'I'm here by accident, wherever I am. My ship was caught in a temporal trap. I was looking for the source of the trap when you found me. It *was* you, wasn't it? Yes.' He recognised the tufts of bristly white hair around the creature's ears — and a desperation in its eyes that it probably hoped was invisible. 'I'm grateful to you for not trampling me to death.'

The creature ignored his thanks. 'I am Sergeant Kandula of the Crei

Imperative. You will explain to me the purpose of this device.' The trunk

indicated the TARDIS.

'That is my ship.'

'It is too small to be capable of hypertemporal travel.'

'Looks are often deceiving. Much like this place, I'd say.' More details

came to him of the moments between his arrival and the collision with his

captor. 'I could almost swear it was Prague.'

The creature's eyebrows went up. 'You are familiar with this

domicile?'

'This city? Why, yes, I've been here on the odd occasion. There's

something terribly wrong with it now, though.' He remembered streets full

of empty cars, and piles of clothing where people had once been

standing. The air was as dead as a tomb's under a sky empty of stars.

And far away, the sound of buildings being demolished. 'If you'd be so

kind as to let me go —'

The straps were already retreating. 'You are an innocent traveller,'

declared Sergeant Kandula of the Crei Imperative. 'Your presence here

is accidental and does not constitute a threat. You may even be of use to

us.'

'That's very reasonable of you, my good man. People aren't always

so understanding.' The Doctor brought himself upright and took the

coat

offered to him on the end of Sergeant Kandula's trunk. He nodded his thanks and shrugged it on.

'Come with me,' said the sergeant, nudging him with a tusk towards the tent's gaping entrance.

'I'd be delighted to.'

In the relatively open air, Kan successfully fought waves of trembling that threatened to render his muscles useless. He was exhausted by the ongoing portrayal of obedience. Commander Ezrehard had been by three times already, demanding to know what he had learned of the alien

and its contraption. The search for the Tipping Device wasn't going well,

it seemed. Kan would have to come up with something soon.

The creature called the Doctor turned his minuscule head to take in the city around them.

'This really is Prague,' the alien declared, trumpeting in a perfectly unexpected but comprehensible rendition of the Crei tongue. 'You've lifted it out of the space-time continuum and left the people behind. Remarkable. May I ask why?'

'In a moment, Doctor.' Kan led the alien and the guards to a nearby corner, where a statue of a dark-skinned human female gazed impassively over the intersection below. An improvised but relatively comfortable officers' mess filled the building behind it.

The Doctor tsked at the walls knocked out and furniture pushed to

one side, the ceilings raised or entirely removed. ‘The original architect

wouldn’t be pleased, in his silent way. What was it Josef used to say?

"Whoever says too much feels too little." Admirable sentiments, don’t you

think, Sergeant Kandula?’

The power of the alien’s gaze was out of all proportion to its size. ‘We

are travellers,’ Kan said, pulling up a sturdy bench and resting his weight

upon it. The Doctor sat with his two legs folded on a boxy chair from the

original furniture as the guards took up positions around the exits. ‘Like

you, Doctor, we travel through the interstices of space, where the laws of

physics are mutable and accidents can be both subtle and devastating.

We are here because of one such accident. An essential component

from our ship’s inner workings disappeared in transit as a result of a

freak interaction with the real universe. A hyperspatial collision, if you

like. Immediately upon noticing the component’s absence, we

backtracked to the point of the collision, where an inhabited world had

unwittingly crossed our path. I say "unwittingly" because it is clear that

the world’s inhabitants intended us no malice. They are irrelevant to us.

But their world itself is not. Our paths crossed the centre of one of its major landmasses. Requiring the missing component as a matter of some urgency, we have extracted that crucial point from the planet and begun our search.'

'I see. Hence the city, the time trap, and the demolition I can hear. You still haven't found this inconvenient component of yours, I assume.'

'No, Doctor. The search is proving more complicated than we anticipated. The component, you see, consists of an atom of gold.'

The alien's silver eyebrows rose higher on its small forehead. 'A single atom?'

'I'm afraid so, one tailored for a very specific function.'

'So, of course, it can't be replaced. Rather foolish of you to lose it, eh?' The Doctor folded his hands in an inverted V in front of him. 'Still, there must be an easier way to go about finding it than by tearing Prague apart, stone by stone. That's a very primitive solution to a sophisticated problem.'

'I concur completely,' Kan said with perhaps more sincerity than was wise. 'But there are no obvious alternatives.'

'Well, why don't you let me take a look at this ship of yours? Perhaps I can help you repair it.'

'I fear your help in that regard would be insufficient.'

'You know, I've never once thought of myself as such.'

‘We are inside the ship at this very moment, you and I and all of "Prague".’

‘Really? Good grief.’ Kan watched the Doctor look out of the smashed windows in surprise. ‘How absolutely remarkable.’

Kan kept his emotions carefully private. ‘You claim to know this city. Help us find the component. Without it, our mission cannot possibly succeed.’

‘Quite. But perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me first, Sergeant Kandula: what is your mission, exactly?’

‘A merciful one, Doctor. Our leaders have charged us to end a war.’

He wiped sweat from his brow with one sweep of his nose. ‘You see the urgency of our situation. The sooner we find the component, the sooner we can leave.’

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‘And the sooner this fine old city can be returned to its proper place and time.’ The Doctor’s strange articulated limbs gripped the arm of the chair. ‘Very well. Let’s get on with it, then.’

‘Excellent, Doctor — but be assured that your ship will be kept securely here until we return. Any attempt to escape will be futile.’

‘I am a prisoner, then?’

‘I wouldn’t use such a clumsy term.’

‘They often don’t,’ said the Doctor, rising to his feet and dusting

himself down, ‘but the meaning’s always the same.’

No, Kan silently disagreed. I’m putting the thought into your head.

Together, accompanied by their retinue of guards, they headed out into

the ancient city.

They drove on the back of a floating flatbed under the starless sky —

in reality, the Doctor now realised, the interior of a massive cargo bay in

the belly of an even larger ship — past blank-faced buildings in the

Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque styles. None of the façades in the Old

Town Square appeared to be damaged, but he could hear the sound of

high-tech jackhammers tearing up streets not so far away. He needed to

think quickly.

By the look of the clothes and vehicles left behind, he estimated the

city’s date of capture to be around the twenty-fourth century. A thousand

years, then, after the death of the man whose statue still dominated the

square, and whose life and beliefs had led to the Bohemian wars and the

invention of armed infantry. Pondering that detail, he decided on the

following plan:

‘Gold is a unique substance. Of several isotopes, one, Gold-197, is

perfectly stable. It’ll last for eternity, give or take, and that’s why it’s built

into so many important systems. This temporal permanence can also

cause problems, as you've discovered. Gold doesn't like leaving its proper time, you see, and can drag a wake through the real universe when you force it to. If that wake catches on any other gold, a resonance can form, dragging it back into the continuum. Like a fisher's net snagging a reef, if you will. Look for outcrops of gold in the city and you're likely to find your missing piece.'

'We have already looked, Doctor,' Sergeant Kandula said with an impenetrable expression. 'Our instruments scanned the city from edge to edge. The Tipping Device is not in an open space or one lightly concealed from our senses. It must therefore be hidden where even our keenest instruments cannot reach. Can you think of a likely location?'

'A couple of places come to mind.' He considered for a moment. 'An old friend might be able to help us.'

'There is someone else in the city?'

'I'm being metaphorical, old chap. Don't the Crei have metaphors?'

'They are discouraged.'

'To your detriment.' He sighed. 'No, the friend I'm talking about has been dead a very long time. And strictly speaking it's not him we're going to visit. It's his nose. It may not be as useful as yours, Sergeant Kandula, but it may hold the solution to all our problems...'

* * *

The Doctor told the story while the flatbed pilot drove them to the cemetery. It was almost too horrible to contemplate. A long time ago, a human astronomer called Tycho Brahe had lost his nose in a duel. Luckily for the astronomer, a human's nose was largely ornamental, so a facsimile made of wax and gold was sufficient to repair the disfigurement.

'Naturally it was buried with him, in the Old Jewish Cemetery,' said the Doctor, guiding them through the winding streets to a patch of ground covered with thousands of monuments, all leaning and twisted like snaggled teeth.

Kan activated the flatbed's repulsors to lift them over the monuments to the place the Doctor indicated.

'Be gentle, if you wouldn't mind,' said the alien, as automated excavating machines went to work. 'He's been dug up once already.'

The machines made short work of the damp earth. Soon a casket was revealed and lifted into view. The Doctor waved away the guards, and went to work with a small sonic tool of his own until the lid was loose.

'If it's here,' he said to Kan, 'you'll know?'

'Immediately after the lead shielding is removed.'

The Doctor nodded his alien head and heaved on the lid. It fell aside,

revealing a skeletal figure draped with the rotten remains of finery. Kan

gestured with his nose at the small cone resting lopsided on the dead

alien's skull. Sensors focused upon it, seeking the unique neutronic

signature.

He kept his face carefully blank as the results came in. 'Negative,

Doctor. The Device is not present.'

'Ah, well.' The Doctor sighed. 'I'm sorry, my friend,' he said, adjusting

a scrap of errant cloth around the corpse's neck and sliding the lid back

into place. 'We disturbed you for nothing.'

'He is dead, Doctor. He cannot be disturbed.'

'No, but his memory can be.' The Doctor wiped his hands on his

green jacket and leaped back up into the flatbed. 'Fill the hole in, and

we'll try somewhere else.'

Kan issued the orders.

'Second time lucky, eh?' The Doctor indicated that the flatbed should

turn left at the first major crossroads after the cemetery. He found it eerie

being driven around the empty city, past cars that had stalled in the

middle of the road or descended on autopilot when their occupants had

been removed. There was no sound apart from that of alien machinery.

He was afraid to ask how many buildings had been ground into dust

in

the quest for the mysterious Tipping Device.

‘I hope you’re not thinking of escaping,’ said the sergeant, apropos of

nothing.

Why *did* Kandula keep bringing that up?

‘Turn right here,’ the Doctor told the Crei driver, pointing along a wide

stone bridge flanked by 16 triangular ice guards. They passed under the

arch of an empty tower and onto the broad thoroughfare itself. At over

half a kilometre long, the bridge was adorned with no fewer than thirty

statues.

The Doctor ordered the flatbed to stop in front of the third one on the

north side, a tall, bronze crucifix with two grieving people standing at its

base. ‘See that sign up there?’

Under the ‘arms’ of the cross hung a series of gold letters in an arc.

Sergeant Kandula squinted at them. ‘I see symbols, but they — no, wait

— I can read them! "Holy, Holy, Holy," uh, something, "of Hosts".’

‘Yes, that’s exactly right. Well done.’

‘How can I read that? I am not proficient in this planet’s languages.’

‘Never mind that right now. It’s a long story.’ The Doctor rubbed the

bridge of his nose, keeping to himself the knowledge of the gift he had

shared with so many companions. The thought reminded him of Jo. ‘The

sign, as you've noticed, isn't complete. There's a letter missing, rendering one of the words meaningless. The missing letter is a vav from the Hebrew alphabet. It was stolen in the twentieth century under mysterious circumstances. The bridge is under constant camera surveillance, you see. No one could explain how it was accomplished.'

'If it's missing, of what value is it to us now?'

'Its value lies in the fact that I know where it's hidden.' The Doctor winked. 'Drive on, will you? Take us to the last statue on the far end of the bridge. Then we'll see what we will see.'

Kan suppressed his anxiety as they crossed the short distance. The riverbed beneath the bridge was muddy and pungent, cut off from its source the moment the city had been wrenched out of the universe. He clenched the end of his nose shut and thought of his homeworld's scented air, long lost to the far-flung legions of Crei when the Enemy had struck. A shudder rippled through him at the memory of what he had seen in the aftermath. He could not countenance such horror, or any repeat of it. Better that the Crei die out than let their existence be defined by vengeance and –

'There, there, old fellow. There's no need to fret.'

The touch of the Doctor's hand on his armoured left shoulder made

him jump. ‘Do not approach!’ he trumpeted. ‘Keep back!’

‘Steady on, steady on. I’m just trying to reassure you. We’ll find this missing component of yours — and not before time, I’d say. You’ve been on edge too long, by the look of you. Post-traumatic stress is a terrible thing. I’ve seen it many times before. You lost someone close to you, I presume.’

‘My herd-mother,’ he said before he could stop himself. ‘My brothers, my sire — all gone.’ His chest wheezed. ‘All dead.’

‘Prague is no stranger to grief,’ said the alien with genuine sympathy. ‘I recently lost a friend myself. Not to death, I’m pleased to say, but I miss her dearly all the same. Friendships can be fleeting things. Would you call us friends, Sergeant Kandula?’

‘Allies,’ he croaked.

‘Strange, because my ship thinks otherwise, given you read the sign back there.’

‘Your ship — it thinks?’

‘Again, a long story.’

The flatbed decelerated, and Kan forced himself to concentrate. The last statue consisted of three robed humans standing on stained, stone plinths. One held a cross; the other two carried jar-like containers.

‘Note the figure on the left,’ said the Doctor. ‘Cosmas, as he was called, trained as a doctor in Syria two thousand years ago. Unlike some, he became a very good one. This isn’t a very flattering likeness,

though.

He'd be decidedly unhappy with the nose.'

'Have you met everyone, Doctor?'

'Not for want of trying.'

The alien jumped with surprising nimbleness from the flatbed to the wall next to the statue. The jar in the stone hands possessed a circular base, which the Doctor unscrewed. A single golden letter dropped into his palm.

'How did you know it would be there?' Kan asked, amazed.

'Put that one down to the misadventures of youth,' the alien said, resealing the stone container with a perfunctory twist. 'Humans may not always acknowledge it, Sergeant Kandula, but a good mystery makes life altogether more interesting.' He winked one tiny eyelid. 'Test it, man, and let's know for sure.'

The scan, once again, came up negative.

'Hmmm.' The Doctor worried at his mane of white hair. 'This is proving to be quite a conundrum. What about your friends elsewhere? Could they have found the answer by now?'

'You wriggle like an eel in a net,' Kan said, hoping that the Doctor would take the hint this time. 'Why are you in such a hurry to leave?'

'Why are you so keen on keeping me here?' The Doctor leapt back aboard the flatbed. 'Anyone would think you're overcompensating — but

for what? And for whose benefit, eh?'

9

'Report, Sergeant Kandula!' boomed an elephantine voice from the Crei officer's chest plate. 'Promotion awaits a positive reply!'

'My investigation is proceeding,' replied Kandula by some form of radio, the Doctor presumed. 'We have not yet, however, located the Tipping Device.'

'Too slow, Kandula! I need results. The clock is ticking, you know.'

'I do know, sir, and I am doing my very best —'

'Not good enough. Do more! Don't make me regret putting my faith in you.' The communication ended with an abrupt click.

'My commander is in a hurry,' said the sergeant, shuffling his broad feet to an inaudible but decidedly anxious beat.

'He certainly sounded so, yes.' The Doctor cupped his chin and thought hard. The more time he spent with Sergeant Kandula, the more inconsistent his behaviour seemed. 'All right. Let's try right back where we started. There's a clock in the Old Town Square, an astronomical clock, as a matter of fact. I know it's still there because I saw it when we set out. But —' He feigned a sudden thought. 'It won't be running now, will it? Time is stopped here in the city. You and I are protected by the trap itself, which recognises us as external influences.'

Kandula nodded his great, domed head. ‘That is correct, Doctor.’

‘Which only makes it all the more puzzling that your commander said that his "clock" was "ticking". I thought the Crei didn’t use metaphors. He must have been talking about something specific, then, a timekeeper originating outside the city. Why exactly are you in such a hurry, again?’

‘That is a Crei military secret,’ said Kandula, again radiating that strange impression of saying words he didn’t mean — or *not* saying what he truly wanted to convey.

‘Yes, I thought as much.’ The Doctor’s lips pursed in irritation. ‘The Tipping Device is a trigger, isn’t it? One of the unstable isotopes of gold programmed to set off some sort of weapon when it decays. Gold-198, perhaps, with a half-life of three days; or Gold-194, with barely a day and a half. How much time do you have left before the device explodes, Sergeant Kandula? And who was supposed to be on the receiving end?’

‘The Enemy,’ Kandula said in a hollow voice. ‘It will utterly destroy them.’

‘There’s always an enemy with you military types.’ The Doctor couldn’t keep a lid on his annoyance. ‘If there isn’t one in front of you, you find one behind you. If you can’t find one, you invent one. And if you can’t invent one, you find one among yourselves. It’s such a simple equation, but it doesn’t add up.’

‘We are not mathematicians, Doctor. We are soldiers. We follow orders.’

‘Well, I’m not a soldier and I don’t recognise your orders. I’m not helping you find your wretched trigger. In fact, I mean to stop you by any

means at my disposal. I advise you not to stand in the way.’ He adopted the Eighth Pose of Readiness taught by the Aikido Masters of Venus.

‘Don’t be a fool, Doctor,’ said Kandula, seeming to be almost in tears. ‘You can’t fight all of us.’

‘Oh, can’t I? I will if I’m forced to,’ he told the gigantic soldiers. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

Kandula stiffened at the challenge. ‘Restrain him, but don’t harm him,’ he instructed the guards, ‘too much.’

With a loud, trumpeting sound, the three Crei soldiers converged on the Doctor.

* * *

Kan backed away, certain that the Doctor’s fate — and his last hope — was sealed. How had it come to this? He had somehow pulled himself back from certain doom — and now, disaster!

But it didn’t go as he feared. First one guard then another went tumbling aside, propelled over the edge of the flatbed by their own

momentum and the Doctor's combat skills. The third, enraged by the dishonouring of his fellows by one so tiny, lost all reason and charged with head held low and trunk flailing. The Doctor dodged nimbly aside — faster than any Crei could move — and tugged one sharpened tusk just enough to send the soldier off-balance. With a blast of dismay, the soldier followed his fellows onto the street.

And now the Doctor was holding a pistol in both tiny hands, plucked from the last guard's trunk-holster as he went by.

'Drive, Sergeant. You're going to take me to the TARDIS.'

'I cannot,' Kan protested automatically. 'I would rather die than betray the Crei.'

'Look at it this way...' Before the guards could lever themselves back up onto the flatbed, the Doctor kicked expertly at the knee pedals and slid one hand into the trunk-space. The engine roared. With a lurch, the flatbed moved fast back along the bridge. 'Hold on!'

The Doctor drove with reckless abandon, careening through the streets of the ancient city. Kan was thrown from side to side with such force that even his armour couldn't keep him upright. He rolled across the back of the flatbed like a pebble in a tin can, his already battered body sustaining yet more bruises.

'You'll never make it,' he cried. 'Your ship is guarded by the rest of the squadron!'

'I'll find a way past them.'

‘But you won’t have the element of surprise this time. The guards back there will have sounded the alarm by now.’

‘Haven’t you?’

Kan had no ready answer for that.

11

They leapt over an intersection and knocked down a series of relatively modern street signs with a succession of loud crashes. Somehow, above the noise, Kan heard the Doctor cry, ‘Listen to me, Kandula. We can talk now without anyone listening in. I need to know where your loyalties truly lie. Now is the time to decide once and for all.

You can’t run forever!’

Kan knew that too. His desperate attempt had ended in potential disaster. ‘I’ve been a soldier all my life,’ he wailed. ‘But now I don’t want anyone else to die! What’s wrong with me?’

‘Nothing at all,’ said the Doctor. ‘You have to trust me. If you do that, I guarantee you that everything will work out.’

Kan wanted to believe him, even as his mind rebelled against itself. Why would he dream of trusting this flimsy-looking alien, with his wispy hair and tiny nose? Perhaps it was the way he had defeated three Crei guards more easily than someone twice his size. Perhaps it was his knowledge of the city around them, and his obvious affection for it. Or perhaps it was something else, the feeling that somewhere, somehow,

the Doctor had made many such decisions himself, and lived to give Kan

the chance he needed right now...

Feebly, with his delicate trunk and tusks protected by his upraised

legs, Kan nodded.

Instantly the flatbed's wild acceleration eased. The Doctor stepped

away from the controls with his hands raised. He kicked the gun to where

Kan lay shaking, wondering what was going to happen next.

'Pick it up,' the Doctor said. 'You're supposed to be bringing me in,

remember? I'll never get to the TARDIS, otherwise.'

'Yes. I understand.'

His communicator was squawking; he could ignore it no longer. 'I

have re-apprehended the alien,' he informed Commander Ezrehard,

hoping the tremor wasn't as obvious in his speech as it seemed to his

ears. 'The situation has been contained.'

'Situation? What situation? I gave you the simplest of tasks and

you've turned it into a carnival!'

'I believe the alien does know the location of the Tipping Device.' The

Doctor nodded encouragingly, and Kan's courage held. 'Meet me at

Science Section HQ sir.'

'You'd better know what you're doing, Kandula. This is your last

chance!'

Kan's trunk was trembling when the commander left the line. The

flatbed wobbled as he took back the controls.

‘Do you really know where the Device is?’

‘I suspect I do,’ the Doctor said. ‘Let’s go, shall we? We’ve got a clock to start.’

A large contingent of Crei had gathered in the Old Town Square. The

Doctor immediately recognised Commander Ezrehard by his air of puffed-up self-importance. His armour was the most ornate and therefore, perversely, the least functional. The contradiction irritated the

Doctor, as so many things about the military mindset did. Who else would reward people for becoming worse at their job?

The massed Crei converged on the flatbed as Sergeant Kandula brought it to a halt. Powerful lamps illuminated the Old Town Hall, casting the city’s best-known architecture in a surreal light. The two asymmetrical towers of the gothic Church of Our Lady Before Tyn dominated the far side of the square. The air was thick with the heavy scent of the Crei, a mixture of ozone from their machines and musk rising from their thick skins.

The Doctor let himself be shoved from the flatbed by Sergeant Kandula, who had fastened his arms behind his back before their arrival.

The sergeant’s trunk was stronger than it looked, and nearly sent him sprawling. He recovered and straightened himself with some dignity.

‘I’d say good day to you, sir,’ he said to the commander, ‘only I’ve no

idea what time it is outside this trap of yours.'

The commander was unflapped by the Doctor's attempt at levity. 'Are you a citizen of this planet?' he barked.

'I have been at times, yes.'

'Understand, then, that unless you immediately reveal to us the location of the Tipping Device, we will lay waste to this world's entire surface. This city will be the first of many thousands destroyed. Its fate rests solely in your hands.'

'Well, since you put it so reasonably...' He smiled without humour. 'This way.' He forced a path through the crowd of soldiers and around the side of the Old Town Hall to where the two complicated faces of the Astronomical Clock overlooked the ancient paving stones. The ornate hands on the uppermost face were stopped one minute short of midnight.

'What is this primitive mechanism?' Narrowed eyes scanned the overlapping circles and symbols with no appreciation, the Doctor was sure, of art or science, except as means to an end. 'Its function eludes me.'

'It tells the time,' said the Doctor, 'which you've stopped. On the hour, every hour, figures emerge from those doors up the top there, under the little roof. This Device of yours will be on one of those figures.'

'Guards, tear this structure to the ground!'

'No, wait!' The Doctor placed himself between the Crei hordes and

the oldest clock on Earth. ‘Listen to me. Sergeant Kandula told me about

your war. Isn’t there another way to resolve the situation without

resorting to the Device?’

‘Your rhetoric is redundant. The decision has been made.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that — but at least spare the clock. You have the

capacity to start time again. Why not let the thing you want appear of its

own accord? You’re a reasonable being, commander. There’s no sense

in tearing down something precious when it doesn’t actually stand in your

way. That would be nothing but unconscionable vandalism.’

The commander thought for a moment, clearly not wanting to seem

uncivilised. Behind him, Sergeant Kandula shifted nervously from his left

to right pairs of legs.

‘Very well. For aiding us, I will grant you your wish.’

The Doctor didn’t hide his relief. ‘Thank you very much indeed.’

‘Yes, yes. Now move aside while the temporal fields are relaxed. We

will extract the Device the moment it appears.’

The Crei turned their attention on the clock as a sudden wind

whipped along the empty streets. With a series of rising whirrs and

clunks, the ancient mechanism began to turn again.

The Doctor, glad to be out of the spotlight, edged to where Kandula

was waiting for him.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he whispered, and Kandula nodded with a mixture of desperation and relief.

The clock wound towards the hour as he and Kandula, momentarily forgotten, hurried along an empty street. For the first time since he had been caught in the Crei’s temporal trap, the city seemed a vital thing, restored from the deathly grip that had clutched it tight.

In his mind’s eye, he imagined the skeleton of the main clock face tipping over its hourglass and pulling the rope that would open the door above. The clock wouldn’t chime, but figures would emerge nonetheless: a procession of saints, a flute-playing Turk, a Miser shaking his cane, and Vanity admiring himself in a mirror.

Quite a show for a device over a millennium old. The Doctor could only hope that he and Kandula would have enough time before Ezrehard realised the Tipping Device wasn’t actually there.

They turned left. Kandula’s feet thundered like those of a stampeding bull elephant. Ahead, the House of the Black Madonna came into view.

Two guards protected the officers’ mess and its contents.

‘I’ll deal with them,’ said Kandula, unholstering his weapon and clenching it tightly in his trunk. With one precise shot, he cut the Doctor’s bonds. ‘You must escape at all costs.’

‘We’ll escape together,’ the Doctor promised him. The TARDIS key

was already in his right hand.

The guards noticed them and trumpeted a challenge. Kandula

ordered them to stand down, but they weren't stupid. Weapons flashed,

Kandula's on a lower setting but the guards' set to wound or kill. The

sergeant's armour flared. The Doctor danced as sparks scattered around

his black leather shoes.

'Quickly, Doctor!' Kandula cried.

The Doctor leapt through an empty window frame into the café and

ran to where the TARDIS stood, blue and patient, in its web of restraints.

The key slid smoothly into the lock. The doors opened.

'Come on, Kandula!' the Doctor called over his shoulder as he hurried

inside. The familiar white control room enfolded him. His fingers flew

across switches and dials. Delicate instruments reached out to examine

the partially deactivated temporal trap and, through the chink Ezrehard

had created, prepared to turn it inside out.

The rate of gunfire was increasing outside. The alarm had clearly

been raised. 'Kandula!' Realising that the sergeant hadn't followed him

inside, the Doctor hurried to help him.

Too late. The sergeant was limping and bleeding through the joints of

his now-inactive armour. Shots continued to strike him as he staggered

into the safety of the TARDIS and collapsed on the floor. The door was barely large enough to admit him.

The Doctor lunged for the door control and took shelter behind the console. A few stray shots that made it through the closing gap were absorbed harmlessly by the control room's roundels. As soon as the door was shut, the Doctor gave the TARDIS its head.

Wheezing, groaning, the central column began to move. The bindings affixed to the outside were useless once the dematerialisation circuit was activated. Time and space twisted in complicated knots, and the real battle began.

Two very different machines clashed like titans, each attempting to thwart the other's will. Neither one backed down easily. A thousand years the conflict might have lasted, in self-contained pockets of the space-time vortex that were undetectable from the outside. The conflict expended energy on a scale barely imaginable.

But in the end, there could be only one victor.

The Crei ship, the source of the temporal trap, became entangled in its own web and Prague, damaged and invaded but still more or less intact, was returned to its proper place in the continuum.

The Doctor moved steadily around the TARDIS's console, checking that all was running smoothly in the wake of the battle. Even under the most ordinary of circumstances, he could never be too certain.

When he was confident that he had done everything in his power, he went to check on Kandula. The sergeant's breathing was slow and ragged around the edges, as though his lungs were filling with blood. His trunk lay flat and limp before him.

'Stand up, old chap,' the Doctor told him, pulling at one corner of the massive armour. 'If you'll just let me look at you —'

'No, Doctor.' The sergeant's voice was firm and his weight unmovable. 'I'm dying, and I'm not afraid of it, now I have done what needed to be done.' Bloodshot eyes swivelled to focus on the Doctor. 'It is done, isn't it?'

'Yes. By reversing the temporal field, I caught Commander Ezrehard

in his own trap. Fitting, really. There's a small chance he might escape, but I'll take care of that possibility too, in time. We're going somewhere he'd never think of looking, and getting rid of that wretched trigger forever.' The Doctor stepped back and patted the outside of his coat. His fingers detected nothing untoward. 'Where exactly did you hide it, by the way?'

'Inside pocket,' Kandula wheezed. 'Left side.'

From there the Doctor produced a small, lead sphere that hadn't been in his possession before. 'Ah, yes. Thank goodness for that.'

‘I’m sorry to involve you in this,’ said the sergeant. ‘It wasn’t my intention.’

‘No. I see that now. You stole the Device — when Before the collision with Earth, I presume?’

‘Yes. And when its absence was discovered, I told the commander that the collision was responsible, thinking that he would declare the mission a failure right there. I never thought he’d be so persistent.’

‘That’s the trouble with the military mind,’ the Doctor said softly. ‘You can never underestimate its dogged devotion to duty, beyond all reasonable cost.’

‘I resolved to hide the Device somewhere it couldn’t be found.’ Kandula’s deathbed confession ground on, even as his breathing faltered. ‘It wasn’t easy. Ezrehard would tear the city to the ground to find it. I was becoming desperate. I feared that my complicity would soon be discovered. Fear got the better of me — and that was when I ran into you.’

Was it then you planted the Device on me?’

‘No, later, when you were in Science Section HQ. I wanted you to escape and take the Device far away, forever, but you didn’t understand... couldn’t have known what I wanted... didn’t seem to...’ He coughed, and bright red blood splattered the white floor. His thick legs twitched. ‘I betrayed... my people.’

‘You are a good soldier,’ the Doctor told him. ‘The very best kind. You

did what you had to do in order to avert another monstrous catastrophe.

That’s more important than victory, don’t you think?’

The great head nodded. Kandula’s eyes closed. The Doctor squatted

next to him as the TARDIS strained on through the space-time vortex to

its ultimate destination. He stroked the leathery skin until the sergeant’s

heartbeat ceased and his final exhalation sighed into silence. Still he sat

next to the fallen Crei, thinking about all he had lost in recent times, and

how small a thread that amounted to in the cosmic skein.

Standing, he walked to the console and checked the course he had

programmed. Soon they would be arriving at their destination. And

then...?

He exhaled heavily through his proud nose. The time trap had

snatched him while on a heading far from Earth. The little world that so

vexed and fascinated him clearly wasn’t done with him yet. Best not to

fight it, perhaps, and see what it had in store for him next. Jo might have

left him, but he had had other friends there, and would have more, if he

gave fate a chance.

‘Don’t worry, old girl,’ he said, patting the console’s straining side.

‘We’ll be home soon.’

It was cold and dark at the long end of time. Few visitors came to see

what remained of the universe on the brink of heat-death. Theoretically,

there was supposed to be nothing: no survivors, no ruins, no last

messages. Truth, however, was always more complicated than theory.

Numerous advanced civilisations used it as a dumping ground for things

that had no place in the universe. Time travellers frequently popped into

being to deposit a dangerous item in the void, then depart as quickly as

they had come, leaving the item to tumble through nothingness, never to

be seen again.

A stock-take of the vacuum would have produced a long list of

intriguing items, including several powered-down Daleks, a needle-thin

battle cruiser bent into the shape of a pretzel, a sliver of crystal so cold it

made the surrounding vacuum look positively balmy — and one dead

soldier cradling a single atom that had once, long ago, been gold.

Room for Improvement

James A. Moore

An Adventure of the First Doctor,

with Ian Chesterton

The sky was weeping, a constant torrent of rain that brought with it a promise of cold weather and just possibly snow. Perfect weather, the Doctor felt, for taking in a bowl of goulash. He clutched his cane a little tighter and tapped its foot on the concrete as he thought. Ian followed along behind him. Barbara and Susan did not, having decided, it seemed to the Doctor, that they were either hungry or not feeling overly sociable.

The problem wasn't with the location, Prague, but with the timing. The window pane where he looked at his reflection and that of his companion was made of a scratch-resistant polymer that told him they must have arrived some time after his previous visit to the city... His ghostly mirror-self nodded its head in agreement with his thoughts.

'Your time machine has its own mind when it comes to where we land, Doctor.' His companion, Ian, was a strapping lad, broad of shoulder and narrow of waist. Ian Chesterton was often volatile in temper but more rational than he liked to admit. As a science teacher from a time

when science was still in its fledgling stages on the planet Earth, he was

also always ready to learn more about the universe and his own planet.

Today should prove a lovely opportunity for him. He was also

insufferable when it came to stating the obvious.

'In this case, Chesterton, it's the *when* that irritates me, not the

where.' He narrowed his eyes as he looked for landmarks. Yes, they

were in Prague. Not far away a video screen on the side of a seven-

storey brick building that had once held Koursha's, his favourite place for

eating goulash, was showing the latest news. There looked to be several

of the screens on different buildings and the Doctor frowned.

In his long existence, it seemed unfortunately likely that the

government was making certain people heard and saw what they wanted

their citizens to see and hear. Still, the news would at least tell him what

was going on. He tapped Ian lightly on the leg with his cane and headed

over to the monitor.

A date stamp in the upper corner told him that it was 16 November

2908 and that they'd arrived just after noon. The streets should have

been packed and instead were virtually deserted. A calm voice spoke

softly, reading the news in an odd fusion of Czechoslovakian and other

languages that had merged over the centuries. The Doctor listened,

hearing his native tongue instead; a pleasant side effect of the TARDIS that made learning new languages virtually unnecessary. Images of a hospital overflowing with patients showed on the screen.

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‘Only 48 hours after the first case showed itself, a total of 1,753 people have now fallen ill with the unidentified plague that has kept the streets of Prague quiet. Though the Centre for Disease Study and Containment assures us that the situation is being carefully monitored, there have been no new announcements as to the source of what many locals are calling the Blue Plague.’ The image on the screen changed, showing a computer- generated man’s naked form. ‘As seen in this diagram, the plague is easily identified, the victim’s skin does, in fact, take on a light blue tint, followed almost immediately by high fever and, in every documented case so far, shortly resulting in a coma.’ As they walked away the next story started. ‘With elections only days away, Illeu Modanovich, the incumbent head of the European Council and one of the driving forces behind the Technological Front, has promised sweeping changes for the capital city of Prague and for all of the human race...’

‘What do you suppose it all means, Doctor?’

The Doctor adjusted his coat and then tapped the next screen they

passed with the head of his cane. ‘I suspect it means we should head to

the hospital, my dear boy.’

‘What for, Doctor?’

‘Because I am the Doctor, and there are people here who need help.’

It sounded good on the surface, of course, but it went deeper than that.

He’d travelled to Prague many times and had a fondness for the city.

Moreover, he’d never been to this particular time in Prague before, but

he’d been later in the history of the city and couldn’t for the life of him

remember a single occasion when a plague named after a colour other

than black had devastated the populace.

It wasn’t all that difficult to find the closest hospital. The same

structure had stood a hundred years earlier, though a few changes had

taken place. More buildings had been added to the structure, and

enough parking spaces to almost hide the actual facility.

Ian continued to gape, which wasn’t really all that surprising. He was

a good man who continued to look at the changes in his own world and

his experience on others with the eyes of a child. Half the fun of having

the lad around was simply the pleasure of watching what had become

old appear new again and sharing the sense of wonder vicariously. Not

that the Doctor would admit that, of course.

‘Do you think there’s something you can do to help, Doctor?’

‘Well, my boy, we won’t know until we’ve looked into the situation, now will we?’

‘What do you know about this era, anyway?’

The Doctor smiled tightly as he looked around the area. ‘I can tell you that there are many amazing changes that occur for the human race. Not the least of which is the advances in medicine. But there are darker

aspects, as well. If I recall correctly, there is a war going on.’

‘A war?’ Ian frowned. ‘Hardly seem to be any people on the streets, and I know I haven’t seen any soldiers.’

‘Not all wars are fought with military forces. You should know that by now. No, this is a different sort of war than the ones you have unfortunately had a chance to see. If I remember correctly, and keep in mind I’m recalling from a text book, the war that takes place is almost completely political in nature.’

‘What is the war regarding then?’

‘Evolution. It’s a war about evolution.’

‘That old story again? Did we evolve or were we created?’ Ian ran his hand through his thick hair and looked around the area. ‘I’d have thought eventually they’d find new sources of debate, wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh, you may rest assured it has nothing to do with theology. It has to

do with how best to go about it.'

'I don't follow you.'

'There are three camps to the war, as I recall: the Technological Front, the Metamorphosis Front and the Naturalist Front. The Techs want to see the human race improved through artificial means. They want to see a fusion of men and technology in the hopes that machines can make their lives easier and allow for mental evolution. I believe that particular group started in Japan. The Morphs want to use genetics to increase the human potential mentally and physically alike. They have had a few successes, but almost as many setbacks.' The Doctor started walking again, keeping his eyes on the areas where people might come closer. The more he thought about the plague the more he worried. Not so much for himself, but for Ian. 'The Naturalists believe that humanity will evolve when the time is right and not a minute sooner.'

'Any idea who's winning the fight, then?'

'Now, that rather depends on who you talk to, I suppose.' He thought hard about the article he'd read and shrugged. 'As I recall from my studies, the Techs were the most aggressive of the lot...' The Doctor rubbed his chin and considered the situation. 'Well, let's see what we're facing, shall we?'

'Why do I get the impression you're not telling me something,

Doctor?'

'Chesterton, if I spent the sum of my days explaining the areas where we find ourselves every time we landed somewhere, we'd never actually get to go anywhere at all.' The Doctor's voice held a rather sharp tone, but he did nothing to quell it. Ian was his friend and had long since been used to the way he talked. 'Might I suggest you make more advantage of the rather extensive library onboard the TARDIS from time to time?'

'Yes, well, that might be easier if we ever stopped long enough to actually rest for more than a day or so, don't you think?'

And there he went again, pointing out the obvious.

20

The hospital stood 14 storeys in height, with an amazing view of Celakovskebo Park. The Doctor pondered the times he'd been there in the past and in particular his meeting with a few revolutionaries that had occurred quite some time earlier. Then he shook his head and pointed to the main entrance of the building. 'There's where we need to be, Ian. Let's see what's about, shall we?'

Past the sliding glass doors of the main entrance, the lobby of the hospital was already being used as a triage station. There were easily a hundred patients crammed against the walls of the sprawling room, many of them already unconscious or shivering violently. Nurses and

doctors moved in a frenzy of activity, marking the different prone forms

and making notes among themselves regarding which people to take

care of first. Family members huddled together staring at their fallen

brethren with looks of grief mingled with fear.

Ian stared around the large room, his face a study in concern and

curiosity. Some people would have thought him aloof, but not the ones

who knew him. Ian was simply stoic in his demeanour. The Doctor had

seen his companion move from seemingly calm into a combat stance on

numerous occasions and had also seen him go back to the same

unsettling calm only moments after the fights were finished. The Doctor

knew that he could be challenging, and knew that Ian thrived on the

adventures they'd shared. Ian just seldom showed it.

Without a single additional word, the Doctor walked over to the

closest unattended patient with a medical chart and began reading the

information jotted hastily on the forms. He paused twice to look at the

patient: sure enough, the man appeared to be in a coma and his skin

had, in fact, taken on a light blue tinge, likely brought on by blood flow

issues.

He touched the patient's skin. It was overly warm, indicating a high

fever. The man opened his eyes and stared blindly at the ceiling: a motor

reflex, not a sign of consciousness. Slightly yellowed tears fell from the

blankly staring eyes, and the Doctor caught one on his fingertip and brought it close to his own eye, frowning.

‘Ian, give me something to hold this, won’t you?’

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘Give me a slide, a vial, anything that’s sterile, something I can use to hold this fluid and be hasty about it!’ Ian jumped at the change of tone

and immediately sought out a glass container. It was a hospital lobby and not the best place to look for a sterile surface, but he came back a moment later with an empty vial for drawn blood from which he had removed the stopper.

The Doctor nodded his thanks and used the glass to capture several of the free falling tears from the sick man’s watering eyes.

‘There. Perhaps we’ll be lucky enough to find what we need here.’

In the corner of the lobby farthest from where he stood, the Doctor

could see two men arguing with quiet vehemence. He cast a look towards Ian and pointed to the two men. Without a second’s hesitation

Ian moved closer to the two men, nonchalantly.

The patient the Doctor leaned over kept breathing, but his eyes closed again as he drifted deeper into unconsciousness. All around him the activity continued: doctors and nurses, aides of all types, trying to find out where to put the new patients and doing their best to comfort the

distraught families, many of whom were also likely to be infected by whatever had brought down their loved ones. Most of the civilians were dressed in whatever clothes they managed to grab as they rushed for the hospital but a number of them bore symbols that he remembered from his examination of the era — political statements: a silver representation of a cube was the common sign for the Techs, a stylised double helix stated the beliefs of the Morphs, and if there was anyone wearing a political symbol for the Norms, the Doctor could not identify it.

Following a hunch, the Doctor stared down at his patient first, and then at several of the others who were suffering from the plague. Not one of them wore the cube design. Several wore the helix pattern on their clothes or even on their flesh, but a good number also simply wore whatever jewellery they might have been expected to wear. He'd always been fascinated by the different accessories worn in different locations. It wasn't hard to separate the fashionable from the political.

While Ian was busy eavesdropping on the slowly building argument between doctors, the Time Lord moved over to a laptop computer that was perched on a wheeled stand, the likes of which had once been used only for holding medicines. How sad, he thought, that almost every race seems to grow too lazy to even carry a computer designed to be easily

carried. The screen of the nearly wafer-thin device was lit and showed the name and symptoms for one of the many victims of the plague. With a little careful typing he managed to access the mainframe computer for the hospital. The wonderful thing about computers was that no matter how hard someone tried to make them inaccessible, someone else always seemed to be working just as hard to allow backdoor entrances.

It was merely a matter of knowing how to look, and, while the Doctor didn't often flaunt his abilities, he was adept at finding the hidden passages onto the information matrices.

One quick glance was all he needed to see that the 'blue flu' had already been examined very meticulously. He studied the schematics carefully and nodded his head several times.

'What are you doing?' The voice was loud and deep, with a hard edge.

The Doctor turned and stared into the broadly muscled chest of a uniform that clearly stated 'security' on the left side of the one-piece body suit.

'I'm looking into the cause of the blue flu. Why do you ask?' He

looked up as he spoke and stared into dark brown eyes surrounded by a long face and dark hair.

‘This station is for the diagnosis and treatment of patients. You’re not supposed to use it for personal reasons.’

‘Nonsense!’ The Doctor crossed his arms and looked up at the man in front of him. ‘It clearly says "Information" right here.’ He pointed to the writing at the top of the screen. ‘I’m using the terminal to gather information. What seems to be the problem?’

The security guard took a step back and pondered his response.

‘You’re not on the usual screen.’

‘If the information I want was readily available on the main screen I wouldn’t have to look any further. As it is, I had to go beyond the main screen. Do you see any rules clearly stating that I’ve only the main menu to look over?’

‘Now see here…’

‘Come along then. I’m a doctor; I’m trying to find out pertinent information to allow me to assist in this time of crisis. What seems to be the problem?’

‘I don’t believe you’re supposed to be looking at those files.’

‘They’re clearly pertaining to the situation at hand. How can my looking at them do anything but help me better understand the situation?’

The guard was looking more and more flustered, which was exactly what the Doctor had counted on.

Before the man could give an answer to his question, a fight erupted. The two medics who were arguing near Ian started swinging. A portly man with a receding hairline let out a snarl and bludgeoned the man he'd been yelling at in the side of his head. That was all it took to start the fight in earnest. Rather than succumbing to the blow, the taller man retaliated by starting to strangle his assailant, screaming obscenities. The security guard decided he had somewhere else to be and brushed past the Doctor on his way to break up the scuffle. Ian was ahead of him and physically separated the two men before the taller of the doctors could finish the job of strangling his co-worker.

As the guard took over, Ian came back over to the Doctor, where he was once again reading the information on the computer screen.

'It's worse than I would have suspected, Doctor.'

'Is it now? How so, Ian?'

'It seems the war you were telling me about has escalated. The plague, it's man-made.'

The Doctor tapped the screen with his fingers. 'I know, I was just reading up on the results so far.'

'Excuse me?'

'The blue flu is a ruse, my boy. It's not fatal, not yet at least. It's designed to infect anyone who hasn't been treated with the proper nanovirus.'

‘Doctor, I know you don’t like it, but please explain to me what a nanovirus is.’

‘Nanotechnology, Ian. Extremely small robots, in this case designed solely to enhance the human body. They are the weapons in the political war we were discussing.’

‘But what exactly do they do?’

‘In the case of the one on the screen, it’s designed to mimic a serious illness and to cause a nonfatal coma.’

‘But to what end, Doctor?’

‘That I’m not quite sure of. From what I can see of the design, it’s not meant to actually cause genetic alterations, merely to induce a comatose state. I’ve a few suspicions, of course, but I need to get to a laboratory in order to properly examine the devices at work.’

‘Should we go back to the TARDIS, Doctor?’

‘Not at all. The hospital should have all the facilities we need.’

‘But they’re already overcrowded.’ Ian frowned, and the Doctor smiled. ‘Then this should be fairly easy to take care of, shouldn’t it?’

‘How so?’

‘They’ve too many patients on their hands to bother with us.’ He tapped his cane against the floor twice and began walking, completely ignoring the people surrounding them. ‘Come along, Chesterton, we’ve much to do.’

One thing the Doctor had learned long ago was that being direct

seemed to work in most cases. Rather than bothering with subtlety, he simply opened the doors he needed to enter and began looking for the equipment he needed in each room he passed. The people around them were too busy trying to handle the patients to do much of anything else.

After several failed attempts, he finally located a room with the appropriate equipment.

The vial of yellow tears was sacrificed on the altar of science, and the resulting slide was carefully placed under a powerful microscope, along with two drops of blood, one from the Doctor himself and one from Ian.

Under intense magnification, he saw the microscopic robots moving in on Ian's blood, attacking each cell and infecting them. The robots, golden in colour, quickly attached themselves to the moving cells and then injected a minute amount of fluid into their targets. The infected cells either slowed down their activity, or almost immediately began dividing, apparently depending on what the microscopic machines were designed to do.

The cells that divided bore the same stain as their parent cells, and that was the part that held the Doctor's attention.

'Amazing, Ian! I was expecting to see much less complicated machines in action, but these nanobots are absolutely spectacular. They're actually reproducing themselves.' He couldn't quite keep the

admiration out of his voice.

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‘Self-replicating robots, Doctor?’

‘More than that. They’re perfect parasites, designed to reproduce themselves at the same time that they begin affecting the host’s body. Not only do they make more of themselves in the same fashion as a biological virus, but they also incapacitate the human nervous system. The only reason that they don’t kill the hosts is because that’s not what they’ve been designed to do.’

‘Is there anything we can do to stop them?’

‘Well, of course, my dear boy. That’s why we’re here. Now that I know what they do, I can find a way to make them stop doing it.’

‘What did you have in mind, Doctor?’

‘It’s all really simple enough when you get down to it. The mechanical virus is designed to incapacitate anyone without the right commands to counter them. The right commands, so far, only come from another version of the same virus that overrides the virus.’

‘So you have to tell the nano-things to shut down?’

‘Nanobots, Ian. They’re called nanobots.’ He shook his head. ‘But, yes, essentially that’s what it comes down to.’

‘And how do you propose to do that, Doctor?’ Ian looked baffled, which was exactly what the Doctor would have expected, because he felt

the same way himself. Seeing the solution to the problem was much easier than bringing the solution about.

He looked down at the slide he'd been studying before, collecting his thoughts. The tiny robots that had infested Ian's blood had done nothing

at all to his. He was too far removed from human, apparently.

'I certainly can't change the physiological make-up of every human being in Prague, to say nothing of the planet.'

'I didn't catch that.'

'You weren't supposed to, Ian. I'm talking to myself.'

'Is there any way we could actually change the programming with a broadcast, Doctor?'

'Not in this case, unfortunately, but good thinking. These aren't designed to receive messages that way. They're designed to function until they meet up with a different type of mechanical device that is already present within the bodies of the hosts.'

'So in order to stop them we'd need to actually infect every human being with a different type of nanobot?'

'Ian, you're brilliant!'

'Are you mad? I was joking! What should we do? Look for a warehouse full of the tiny little things?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Not at all. We just have to convince the ones already in their bodies that there is already another nanobot there.'

'And how are you going to do that, Doctor?'

'Oh, it's easy enough. We may not be the ones that administer the

changes, but I think we can give a helping hand to the people in charge.'

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Without another word, the Doctor took his small sample of blood and miniature invaders and got to work. Ian stood by and paced impatiently, growing more and more concerned about when they would be interrupted.

'You should calm down, my boy. We're almost finished here.'

Ian let out a groan and slid down the wall instead of responding.

The Doctor rose quickly to examine his friend, and saw signs that the synthetic infection had started to take hold. 'There, there, my dear boy.

We'll have you right as rain in no time.'

He moved back to the machinery where he'd made himself busy and made the final alterations to his cure for the medical dilemma facing the city and one of his good friends.

A few moments later he lifted a small canister full of liquid and the modified injection system he'd come up with to deliver what he hoped would be a successful cure for the problem at hand.

His first test subject was Ian. Less than a minute after being injected with a droplet of the sterilised water, Ian was recovering. Within five minutes he was back to his old self.

'What did you do, Doctor?'

'I gave you the cure, Ian. I convinced the nanobots in your body that

you had already been indoctrinated into the proper philosophy of life.'

'I'm sorry?' Ian was always rather endearing when he got that puzzled

expression on his face, and the Doctor patted his shoulder affectionately.

'I've infected you with a modified strain of nanobots, Ian. Only a few

and they're completely harmless, I assure you, but they give the proper

signal to tell the other invaders in your system to shut down.'

'You infected me to stop an infection?'

'Pay attention. The virus that was infecting you only attacks people

who are not already a host to the nanobots being used to force evolution.

All I did was convince the original invading machines that you were a

host. The signal has been given, as it were, and the white flag of

surrender has been raised.'

'And you think this will work on everyone?'

'Oh, my, yes!'

'Well, then, shouldn't we be administering your new cure?'

'My thoughts exactly, my boy. Let's be about it.'

Ian carried the container and the Doctor walked down the hallway

leading back to the lobby, giving a small inoculating spray to each patient

lying incapacitated on the ground, or on a gurney. By the time he

reached the lobby proper, several people were already recovering, their

fevers dropping and consciousness returning.

Several of the doctors and medical staff members came to stop him,

but quickly changed their minds when the people they'd watched get steadily worse recovered.

A hospital administrator who introduced himself Dr Korshinski

grabbed the Doctor's hands and shook them vigorously. 'What exactly did you do, Doctor?'

He explained again, and watched the eyes of several of the residents light up in understanding and appreciation. A few of the people around

him weren't as quick to smile.

'What about the nanobots already in people's bodies? What about the evolution of the species?' The woman speaking wore a Tech pin on her lapel, the silvery cube well-polished and clean.

'It shouldn't affect anyone negatively.' The Doctor smiled. 'In fact, it should inoculate anyone who isn't willing to be forced into evolution by a

method that isn't of their choosing. I don't see where that's a problem.'

'But what about people like me, who have already chosen to accept the technological path?'

'What about you? You were already protected from the blue plague, weren't you? It was designed to affect people who were not already members of your party.' Several of the other medical staff turned to look

at the woman, their distaste obvious.

'Now, wait just one minute! I didn't start this!' She backed away from

the sudden looks aimed at her and shook her head. ‘I’m a doctor first and

foremost.’

‘Oh, I think you’ll find a few hurt feelings, my dear. Hopefully no one

else will be foolish enough to seek retaliation for something done by a

few misguided scientists trying to tip the scales in the next election.’

‘What do you mean, Doctor?’ Korshinski asked.

‘I was watching the news on the way over here. I noticed that

elections were coming up soon. I also studied the cause of the blue

plague. It wasn’t meant to kill anyone, though it could have been easily

altered to be fatal. Instead it was meant to incapacitate its victims for a

set amount of time. Just long enough to let the Technological Front make

a few radical moves on the political board, if I had to make a guess.’

‘That’s an outrage!’ The woman lunged forward again, her face set in

anger. ‘Why would anyone ever do such a thing?’

‘I’ve seen it before, you know.’ The Doctor stared through her, looking

back over a hundred incidents he’d experienced in his lifetime. ‘There

are always a few who believe they know what is best for everyone.

Count your blessings, child. This time the radicals in your party decided

to show mercy. They could have chosen to kill everyone instead of

merely making them ill.’

Ian shook his head, his disgust with the entire event obvious.

‘The good news is we’ve caught it in time. The canister has enough to

inoculate the patients at your hospital, and it's easily manufactured on a

larger scale. All you need to do is get the word out there and the plague

should be done for.' The only person listening to him any longer was Dr

Korshinski. Part of the gathered group had begun bickering about the

medical and moral ramifications of what had happened and others

moved to check on the patients who were waking up.

'Thank you again, Doctor.' Korshinski hefted the container that Ian

had passed over to him. 'I'll get on to this immediately.'

As the man moved away, Ian shrugged and the Doctor tapped the

ground with his walking stick. 'Let's be off then, Ian.'

'That's it, then? No bug-eyed monsters? No armoured soldiers trying

to kill us?'

'The same monsters are still out there, Ian, but for now, I think we can

wait a while before we encounter them.'

'Where are we off to then, Doctor?'

'Back to the TARDIS. Who knows, perhaps we can find some goulash

somewhere. Believe me, it's well worth the travel time.'

Life From Lifelessness

Keith R. A. DeCandido

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Romana and K-9

Stefnee stepped out of the transmat capsule and looked out over the city. Turning to her companion, she said, 'Am I supposed to be impressed?'

Jwana sighed. 'Look, I know it doesn't seem like much, but Prague suffered during the invasion. The Wronsdehj did a *lot* of damage.'

They went down the walkway together. Stefnee said, 'Yeah, I know, Jwana, I scanned the feeds.'

Stefnee and Jwana grew up together on Luna. They hadn't seen each other in weeks, and they wanted to spend some time playing tourist, so they transmatted to Earth to go somewhere new. Never having been to Prague, Jwana suggested it.

'Look at this,' Stefnee said, pointing at the buildings they walked past. 'It's all post-invasion. I mean, c'mon, it was twenty years ago. Do we still have to do this form-follows-function nonsense with all the boxy designs and right angles and tiny windows?'

Jwana sighed. 'Just be patient, okay, we're getting to the good bit.'

As they walked further, Stefnee noticed that the ugly modern

structures were becoming less common.

When they turned one corner, Stefnee gasped at the sight of the beautiful building in front of them.

'This,' Jwana said with a satisfied smile, 'is what I wanted to see: the *Altneuschul*.'

Stefnee immediately called that word up on her implant, and what that translated to. 'The Old New Synagogue?'

Nodding, Jwana said, 'It's a Jewish place of worship.'

Having been raised as a RetroPagan on Luna, Stefnee didn't know much about the monotheistic faiths of Terra, so she called up 'Jewish' on her implant — then had cause to regret it. One of the oldest surviving religions among humans, it had far too much history for Stefnee to take in.

Instead, she took in the synagogue: a dark brown slanted roof, a lighter base, with orange-red angled 'awning' style outcroppings just above the ground-floor doors and windows. The surfaces were all intricately designed in what she recognised as a Gothic style. 'This is gorgeous.'

'Let's go inside.' Jwana started running towards the front entrance.

'Can I enjoy the outside for a bit more?' Stefnee asked nobody in particular. She used her implant to take a few snaps, then jogged after

her best friend.

Inside, there were decorated pillars throughout, as well as the filleted ceiling common to this type of structure — except something was wrong.

'Okay,' Stefnee said while staring up at the ceiling, 'that doesn't make sense.'

A voice from deeper inside the synagogue said, 'That is true of many things. It's why we ask so many questions.'

Peering down the aisle in the centre of the synagogue, Stefnee saw a short man with white hair and a thick white beard. *Goddess bless, that's so retro.* Men hadn't worn beards like that since Stefnee was a kid.

The man walked towards them. 'Welcome to the *Altneuschul*. I'm Rabbi Donnig. How may I help you?'

'Why are there five nervures?' At the man's confused look, Stefnee pointed up at the ceiling. 'There are five nervures branching out from each of the support points to keep the ceiling braced. Every Gothic building I've seen on the net has four.'

Donnig smiled, resting his hands on his rather ample belly. 'I suspect that most of the Gothic buildings you've seen have been Christian churches.'

Blinking, Stefnee said, 'I guess so.'

'Four of those nervures would look like a cross.'

'What difference does that make?'

At that, Donnig laughed. Stefnee felt her cheeks burn with

embarrassment. ‘What?’

‘Suffice it to say, madam, that is not an association that the people who constructed this synagogue would have wanted. You are standing right now in the region of Prague known as Josefov, but it used to be called the Jewish Ghetto. It was where Jews were all sent to live away from the Christians.’

‘That’s awful,’ Stefnee said, unable to hide the disgust from her face.

‘I won’t argue with you. Come, let me show you the rest of the synagogue.’

Jwana said, ‘We don’t want to impose —’

‘It’s no imposition. We so rarely get visitors when it isn’t the Sabbath, and it looks like you young women have many questions.’

Donnig took Stefnee and Jwana on a tour of the entire synagogue, answering as many questions as he could. Stefnee made a note in her implant to read up further on the history of Judaism, as it looked fascinating, if a bit nasty.

After Donnig took them through the first floor, including Donnig’s own

apartments, Jwana pointed at a staircase. ‘Where does that lead?’

‘To the attic.’

‘Can we go up there?’

Chuckling, Donnig said, ‘There’s nothing there to see. At least not any more.’

‘What do you mean?’ Stefnee asked. Considering the rabbi had shown them even the non-public areas, she was surprised at his sudden reticence.

Donnig considered the question for a moment. Then, again resting his hands on his belly, he asked, ‘Would you young women be interested in lunch? I was going to have some herring and vegetables, and I’ve more than enough for the two of you to share. If you do, I’ll tell you a story about that staircase.’

Stefnee didn’t know what herring was, but was always looking for new food to try, and liked the idea of a story, so she agreed. Getting stuff off the implant was good as far as it went, but it wasn’t as much fun as hearing someone talk to you.

Jwana went along with it too, so Rabbi Donnig led them to his small kitchen, and he removed several items from the fridge. ‘That staircase leads to the attic, as I said. The rabbi who preceded me closed it off. Her name was Gnom Bursteen, and she was the rabbi for this synagogue on that terrible day when we were invaded.’

When the Wronsdehj came (the rabbi said) they landed in central Europe and encased parts of the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, Poland, Italy and France in some kind of force field. Then they enslaved

us and made us work while the armies of the world tried and failed to penetrate the field.

Rabbi Bursteen had been conscripted to work at the home of one of the Wronsdehj, who had destroyed the city hall of Prague and replaced it with a spherical structure made of what seemed to be skin. The rabbi's job was to moisturise the inner walls to keep them from becoming too dry and inflexible.

Unfortunately, she was forced to work on the Sabbath and was not permitted to hold services. Figuring that the best way to impress the Wronsdehj was to do her work well, she performed her duties in the hope that her diligence would be rewarded.

One day, after a new person had been assigned to aid her, she tried to petition the Wronsdehj for permission to hold services on the Sabbath here at the *Altneuschul*. She went to the Wronsdehj who owned the sphere and hooked herself up to the translator unit that was primarily used so that the Wronsdehj could transmit instructions to their slaves.

The Wronsdehj listened attentively to the rabbi's words with all six ears.

Then, while consuming a live wombat with his upper mouth, he ordered Rabbi Bursteen back to work with his lower mouth, adding that she was at half rations for the next three days.

Luckily for Rabbi Bursteen, she was used to fasting, so half rations

didn't concern her. She just told her growling stomach that it was High

Holy Days.

When she returned to work, her new partner said in a deep voice,

'That was a waste of time.'

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The rabbi looked at her new co-worker, a tall fellow who, despite the

fact that it was summer and inside the force field it was always hot and

humid, wore a thick coat and a long scarf. She looked at him and said,

'What do you mean?'

'The Wronsdehj aren't interested in the needs of their slaves. Well,

beyond making sure you don't starve to death, anyhow.'

You? Aren't you a slave as well, Mr...?'

'Doctor, actually. Whatever it was you asked the Wronsdehj for, you

weren't likely to receive it. They have no reason to care for their slaves

— you won't be around long enough, and neither will they.'

Rabbi Bursteen frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'Nor I, to be honest. It's not as if there's a shortage of places in the

galaxy for them to settle down. You see, the Wronsdehj lost their

homeworld half a dozen centuries ago. Since then, they go flitting about

the galaxy, finding an inhabited planet to settle on for a few months,

capturing a segment of the population and putting them to work, then

blowing it up and moving on.'

That both shocked and worried the rabbi. She did not know how this fellow knew so much, but she didn't like the way his story ended.

'How do you know this?' she asked, incredulous.

'Oh, they've done it before. I've tried to stop them, but they're very difficult to reason with — always constructing biomechanical spheres and eating live animals and putting sentient beings to work.'

Seeing that a patch of the wall was drying up, the rabbi and the Doctor ran over to it. As they worked to make it soft again, the rabbi said,

'Well, that would explain it, then. I was hoping they would allow me to have services on the Sabbath at the synagogue.'

'Ah. Yes, well, the Wronsdehj have no real concept of spirituality, I'm afraid. Materialists through and through. Oh, some of them had religious leanings, but they all went up with the homeworld, sadly.' They finished their task and set down the equipment.

The rabbi was grateful for someone to talk to. This Doctor fellow was rather gregarious, and she found she had missed conversation.

'They do provide downtime,' the Doctor said after a moment. 'Perhaps you can hold a service in the cafeteria.'

Shaking her head, the rabbi said, 'No, Doctor, you misunderstand. While I would appreciate being able to hold services, it is access to the *Altneuschul* that I require.'

The Doctor's eyes grew very wide when the rabbi said that, and he

grabbed her arm with an iron grip. ‘What did you just say? The

Altneuschul? Are you telling me we’re in Prague?’

Unable to help herself, the rabbi laughed. ‘Of course we’re in Prague,

Doctor, where else would we be?’

Letting go of her arm, the Doctor said, ‘Well, with the randomiser, we

could be anywhere. I knew it was Earth, of course, even Romana worked

out that much, but I didn’t realise we were in Prague. It looks so much

different from the last time.’

‘I suppose,’ Rabbi Bursteen said grimly, ‘that the Wronsdehj have as

little use for preserving the structures of a great European city as they do

spiritual needs.’

‘Mmm. Plus, of course, I was here last in the twenty-fifth century.’ He

shook his head. ‘But that’s neither here nor there. Rabbi — you *are* a

rabbi, yes?’

She nodded.

If you are indeed headquartered at the *Altneuschul*, and the structure

still stands —’

‘It does,’ the rabbi said. ‘I was able to talk to one of my friends at the

cafeteria the other day, and she said the entirety of Josefov has been left

alone by the Wronsdehj.’

‘Excellent! I would say, Rabbi, that it is *very* important that we both go

to your synagogue as soon as is possible. You see, unless something's changed, there's something of grave importance in the attic of that building.'

The rabbi's eyes widened. 'You know of the Golem?'

'More than that, Rabbi — I was the one who imprisoned it in your attic.'

'That's ridiculous,' Rabbi Bursteen said. 'It was the Maharal who imprisoned the Golem's remains there.'

'Well, he helped, certainly, and I had to convince him that it was the right thing to do.'

That caused the rabbi to burst out laughing. Even as she did, she noted another dry patch, and she and the Doctor moved to moisturise it.

'Doctor, you are obviously teasing me. The Maharal lived in the late sixteenth century, 550 years ago.'

'Oh, I admit, it's been a while since I saw him last,' the Doctor said as he helped the rabbi moisturise the wall. 'You know, he didn't like being called the Maharal. He preferred to simply be Rabbi Yehuda Loevy, but the populace did rather insist on the title. I suppose after I left he continued telling that story about the vision that led him to the creation of the Golem, and then he took two others to the banks of the Vltava River and used the mud there to create the Golem, hmm? Well, perhaps it did

happen that way. Hard to say, really, as I didn't show up until later.'

Now the rabbi was starting to grow angry. 'Doctor, the Golem is the

sacred protector of the Jews, created by the Maharal — or Rabbi Loevy,

as you called him.'

'Yes, it was — because that's what Rabbi Loevy told it to be.'

You see (the Doctor said), I was on a Liciax ship. The TARDIS had

materialised aboard while it was travelling in hyperdrive. There'd been an

accident and several large meteorites made out of their clay were

tumbling through space — and, because they were in hyperdrive, those

meteorites were scattered all across the galaxy. The Liciax have a very

peculiar hyperdrive, you see, involving the folding of space around them,

so they're in essence everywhere at once. That makes their accidents

rather far-flung.

One piece of clay inadvertently got on aboard the TARDIS,

unbeknown to us. And soon afterwards, having left the Liciax to gather

their clay from across the cosmos, we arrived in orbit around the Earth.

That's when Susan discovered our piece. She panicked, and thought it

was dangerous — so, I'm afraid to say, she jettisoned it.

Most of the meteorite burned up in the Earth's atmosphere, as these

things will do, but a bit of the clay remained. For obvious reasons, Susan

and I had to retrieve as much as possible. That clay, you see, is the

basis of the Liciax's entire economy. It can channel mental energies.

Well, *some* mental energies. Most species don't have that kind of psionic

ability. Humans have the potential, but back in the sixteenth century, very

few did.

The Liciax arrived, having tracked the clay, and they, um, persuaded

us to travel down to the planet to collect it. They sent us down in one of

their shuttles — but when Susan and I arrived at the Vltava River, the

clay was gone. Scans showed that the meteorite *had* landed there, but it

was nowhere to be seen.

Still, we did find the clay rather easily, as it was in the shape of a

large human, wearing the clothes one would expect of a citizen of

Prague at the time, and hitting someone very hard on the head. It

seemed that the Liciax's shuttle had miscalculated rather — it had

brought us to Prague a few years late!

'Quickly, Susan,' I told my granddaughter, 'we must take possession

of this creature.'

'Are you sure we can, Grandfather?' she asked.

'Of course, my dear. Surely the two of us will have superior mental

acuity to that of a medieval human. As a species, humans will not

achieve any sort of psionic ability for several centuries, or don't you

remember your lessons? Now, quickly, before that poor man is hurt.'

We concentrated, focusing all our mental energy on the creature, but were unable to take possession of it. Still, we stopped it from hitting that

man on the head.

'Grandfather,' Susan said, 'do you see what's written on its forehead?' I squinted at the creature. 'I do believe that's Hebrew.'

' *Emet*,' Susan said. 'It means "truth". Grandfather, don't you see? We're in Prague in the sixteenth century — this must be the Golem of Prague!'

Susan was always a keen student of Earth history — in fact, shortly after this, I enrolled her in an Earth school. 'Bless my soul,' I said. 'I do believe you're correct, Susan.'

34

The Golem turned around and started walking. We followed it, naturally, and it led us to the Jewish quarter and the *Altneuschul*. Rabbi Loevy was waiting for the Golem. 'Welcome back, Yossele. Did you deliver the message to —' Only then did he notice Susan and me. 'Who are you?'

'I am the Doctor — and you, sir, are toying with forces you scarcely understand. This creature must not be allowed to continue to exist.'

'I am Rabbi Yehuda Loevy, and I would say the same of you. Yossele here is a citizen of Prague.'

'Balderdash, my good man, it is clay. And clay from another world, no

less.’

‘You speak nonsense, Doctor.’

‘To you, perhaps, but even if you believe that this clay came from a deity rather than outer space, it does not change the fact that it is volatile.’

‘What do you mean?’ Rabbi Loevy asked.

‘The clay responds to literal thought. Obviously, you are a particularly impressive mental specimen.’

Susan added a tidbit from her studies. ‘They call you one of the finest minds in Europe.’

Rabbi Loevy shrugged. ‘I leave such judgments to others. I am simply a humble scholar.’

‘You sell yourself short, my good man,’ I said. ‘Few humans could control the Liciax clay as you do — but it requires mental discipline of a type that only comes with a lifetime of study. Your lifetime has been devoted to studies of rather a different nature — noble, for all that, but not of a type that will help you maintain strict control over your friend Yossele here.’

There was a bit of silence after that, as Rabbi Loevy considered what I told him. Finally, he said, ‘Yes, it is true that Yossele is made of clay. But I was told in a vision to create him to protect our people. The Christians, it is not enough that they exile us to this ghetto, Doctor, but

they accuse us of killing *children*, and using their blood to make our Passover meals — and that is only the beginning of what they do to us.'

I listened to Rabbi Loevy tell the stories of indignities the Jews had suffered in Prague — most of which I knew about in the abstract, but it was somewhat different to hear it from the horse's mouth, as it were.

Still, I did promise the Liciax I would retrieve their clay. While most of this particular meteorite had burned up, there was still what was being used for 'Yossele the Mute'. Rabbi Loevy insisted I stay to observe, to see how much good the Golem was doing his people.

Sadly, that was not what I observed. Instead, I saw a mob storm the gates to the Jewish quarter. Rabbi Loevy told Yossele to hold them back until the emperor's army could quell the uprising. Instead, the Golem started fighting the mob, pummelling anyone who came too close.

Hundreds died at the Golem's hands. His strength was such that the merest tap from his fists was enough to break a human neck. Rabbi Loevy was rather surprised when he first heard the crack of bone, and horrified when he saw the corpses that were soon littered at Yossele's feet.

Among us, Susan, Rabbi Loevy and I were able to make the Golem cease his slaughter — but it was a near thing.

We brought him back to the *Altneuschul*, and I turned on Rabbi Loevy. 'Do you see what I mean? The clay is *dangerous*.'

'Perhaps the clay is dangerous,' Rabbi Loevy said, 'but the Golem is sacred and necessary — not just as an entity, but as a symbol. I agree that Yossele's time has ended — but that time may come back. By then, don't you think we might be able to handle him a little better?'

'What are you suggesting, my good man?'

'Let him stay here. I will hide him in the attic of the *Altneuschul* and give strict instructions that no one is to go there. Yossele will remain there until he is needed once again.'

Susan agreed with him. 'Most of the meteorite burned up, Grandfather — we could just tell them that it all burned.'

I wasn't entirely comfortable with lying to the Liciax — but I also could see both Susan and the rabbi's points. So I agreed. 'But a strict instruction will be inadequate. I shall provide security of my own for the attic.'

'So it's lucky that we found each other, Rabbi,' the Doctor said. 'You see, I'm the only one who can access the attic and retrieve the Golem.' He broke into a grin. 'Well, Susan could, also, but she's not available.'

Rabbi Bursteen considered the Doctor's words. Mostly, she considered them insane. It was simply impossible that the Doctor could have been present in sixteenth-century Prague. On the other hand, he

was obviously, not from Earth, a trait he shared with the Wronsdehj.

The Doctor also knew the story of the Golem of Prague. More to the point, he knew the parts that nobody else knew — about the massacre at the gates, and the strange old man and young woman who helped the Maharal bring the Golem back here. That part of the story had been passed down by the rabbis who were assigned to the *Altneuschul*, and only to them. I'm only telling you now because Rabbi Bursteen said the secret no longer mattered when she told *me*.

'This is all fine, Doctor,' the rabbi said, 'but it doesn't really help us, does it? The Wronsdehj won't let us go to the synagogue.'

'Yes, well, I've never been one for rules and regulations. They're so difficult to keep track of, don't you know.' As the Doctor spoke, he rummaged around in the pocket of his thick coat, and then pulled out a small metal rod. ' *A-ha*. Almost thought I lost this.' He then put the rod between his lips and blew. Nothing happened. Then he put the rod back

in his coat.

The Doctor said nothing else after that, and he and the rabbi continued to moisturise the structure, until they heard a high-pitched whine, followed by several screams that sounded like the Wronsdehj.

'Come on,' the Doctor said, and he led the rabbi to one wall, which he

gestured in front of, causing the living tissue to split apart. This was how

the Wronsdehj made doors.

Standing outside was a dark-haired woman wearing a white dress and silver boots. The rabbi barely noticed that woman, though, as she was too busy staring at the small robot dog that was next to her.

‘Romana, K-9, glad you could make it,’ the Doctor said.

The robot dog then spoke. ‘Thank you, Master.’

The woman, Romana, stood with her hands on her hips, and she did not look happy. ‘What took you so long?’

‘I did tell you I had to reconnoitre.’

‘You call letting yourself get captured by Wronsdehj a "reconnoitre"?’

‘No, I call querying the locals for information a reconnoitre. Romana, this is Rabbi Gnom Bursteen. Rabbi, this is Romana, and that’s K-9.’

Romana ignored the rabbi. ‘I was unable to get the TARDIS to dematerialise. The Wronsdehj force field is —’

‘Yes, yes, yes, yes, I’m sure that’s all very interesting, Romana, but it doesn’t really matter. You see, we’re in Prague, and that means we have

the perfect weapon to use against the Wronsdehj.’

‘But—’

‘Come along,’ the Doctor said, as he moved towards Josefov. ‘We haven’t any time to waste. The Wronsdehj won’t be unconscious for long.’

‘Seventeen point nine minutes, Master,’ the robot dog said.

Feeling rather overwhelmed, the rabbi followed the Doctor and his friends to Josefov. Every time they encountered a Wronsdehj sentry, K-9 fired a laser beam from its nose to deal with it.

They arrived at the synagogue. Rabbi Bursteen had heard the stories about the one rabbi who tried to go into the attic and came down white and shaking — and another story about a Nazi soldier who was prevented from entering the attic by unknown means. She remembered that, and she also remembered what the Doctor had said about a security system. Given that the man walked around with a robot dog that fired a weapon that put a zat gun to shame, she shuddered to think what kind of security such a man might come up with.

When they arrived here, the Doctor grinned. ‘Remarkable. The place hasn’t changed a bit!’ Then he grew serious as they entered, and looked at the rabbi, speaking in a much deeper voice. ‘You should stay here, Rabbi. K-9, you protect her.’

‘Affirmative, Master.’

‘Romana, come with me.’

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The Doctor was gone for several minutes. During the entire time, the rabbi was convinced that the Wronsdehj would come and take her away.

But no Wronsdehj came, and even if they did, she had K-9 standing ready.

Then she was startled by stomping sounds that grew louder in intensity, shaking the entire synagogue. She turned around to see the Doctor, Romana and the Golem of Prague.

It was a little bit taller than the Doctor, naked, its hairless skin a dark brown colour, like clay that had been baked in a kiln. Its features looked almost unfinished somehow, but its huge muscles seemed very well defined. It had circles for eyes, but no pupils or irises, and its mouth was just a slit. The Golem couldn't talk in any case — as it says in the Talmud, humans cannot create life, and the Golem does not have a soul.

Only a *tzaddik*, like the Maharal, could even go so far as to create this approximation of it. Perhaps the clay was indeed from outer space, as the Doctor had said, but it does not matter — even the Doctor himself said that the Maharal was special, one of the few who could manipulate the clay so well. The details may differ, but the story remains the same, and that is all that matters, no?

In a tight voice, the Doctor said, 'Romana and I are controlling the Golem.'

'What will you do with him?' the rabbi asked.

Now the Doctor smiled. 'Make the Wronsdehj an offer. Come on, K-9.'

The Doctor then walked through the streets of Prague. Very soon,

several armed Wronsdehj troops arrived. The Golem immediately moved

on one of the Wronsdehj, who all fired their weapons.

But they had no effect on the Golem, who then picked up one of the

Wronsdehj and threw him so far, he landed in the Vltava River.

'This,' the Doctor said, 'is the Golem of Prague! He is the protector of

the people of this planet! If you do not leave Earth in peace, the Golem

will destroy you all!'

The rabbi did not point out to the Doctor that the Golem was only the

protector of the Jews of the city of Prague, not the whole of humanity —

besides, of what use are legends unless they can be adapted for their

times?

At first, the Wronsdehj did not agree to these terms, and they

attacked the Golem in greater numbers. But it did no good, especially

since K-9 was also helping out.

The Wronsdehj were not used to resistance of this sort, and did not

know what to make of the Golem, who could not be harmed by their

weaponry. Eventually, they gave in to the Doctor's terms, lowered their

force field, made their living structures shrivel into nothingness, and then

departed without a word.

After it was all over, Rabbi Bursteen said to the Doctor: 'Is this why

the Maharal wanted you to keep the Golem here?'

‘Well, perhaps not this specifically, but certainly he knew that the Golem might be needed again.’

‘What happens now?’

Romana spoke before the Doctor had a chance to. ‘Doctor, we cannot allow the Liciax clay to remain here. What if the Wronsdehj had discovered it before we arrived? Can you imagine the havoc they could have wreaked with it? And they’re hardly the only aliens to invade this world — imagine the Daleks or the Rutans or the Sontarans or the Cybermen with control of the clay.’ She shuddered. ‘Honestly, this planet is a magnet for the foulest species of the galaxy. I wonder why you think so highly of it.’

‘The place grows on you, rather,’ the Doctor said to his companion, then turned back to the rabbi. ‘She’s right, though — I think it would be best if I finally fulfilled my promise to the Liciax from so long ago and returned their clay to them, don’t you think?’

‘I cannot argue with you, Doctor,’ Rabbi Bursteen said. ‘Or, rather, I could argue with you, but I do not think I would win. Therefore, I hereby turn over the Golem of Prague to your care, and thank you for your assistance.’

Popping the last piece of herring into his mouth, Rabbi Donnig said, ‘And that is the story of that staircase. I could take you up there, if you wish, but there’s literally nothing there.’

‘You don’t use it for storage?’ Stefnee asked.

Donnig shook his head. ‘Out of respect for what the attic represents, we leave it alone.’ He leaned forward and smiled conspiratorially. ‘Besides, no one is sure if the Doctor’s, ah, "security system" is still in place, and no one wishes to risk it.’

Jwana got up from the kitchen chair she’d been sitting in. ‘Well, thanks, Rabbi, but we should be going.’

Stefnee also rose. ‘Yes, thank you, Rabbi, we really appreciate it.’

‘It is my pleasure,’ Donnig said as he also got to his feet. ‘It is good to see young people who are curious about the world.’

‘There’s one thing I don’t get,’ Stefnee said. ‘That doctor guy — what was his name?’

At that, Donnig chuckled. ‘Does it matter? The Maharal is known now as Yehuda Loevy, Judah Loew, and many others. Perhaps the Doctor has other names, too. But is a name more important than his deeds?’

Looking at Jwana, Stefnee rolled her eyes, and said, ‘Thanks.’ As they left the *Altneuschul*, Stefnee muttered, ‘If you didn’t know his name, you should’ve just said.’

The Long Step Backward

Mike W. Barr

An Adventure of the First Doctor,

with Steven Taylor and Vicki

‘Where do you suppose we are now?’ asked Steven Taylor as the engines of the TARDIS slowed.

‘An excellent question,’ said the Doctor, checking a chronometer.

‘Prague,’ he said, a moment later.

‘That’s a nice surprise,’ said Vicki. ‘Prague is a beautiful city.’

‘I think this will be a little different than the Prague you remember,’ said the Doctor, approaching the door of the TARDIS.

‘How so?’ asked Steven. ‘Is this Prague in the Middle Ages, or the time of the plague, or some such —’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ replied the Doctor, throwing the door open. ‘The TARDIS has taken us to Prague of AD 2348.’

‘It’s *more* beautiful than the Prague I remember,’ said Vicki, sweeping the town with a fascinated gaze. The city, in the centuries since she had last seen it, had expanded, yet somehow kept its Old World charm. Modern — futuristic, really — buildings seemed to grow among the city’s original architecture, becoming a part of the city by virtue of the contrast they offered. The boundaries of the city, which were modern, yet had a

timeless charm, swept off into the horizon to merge effortlessly with the

countryside beyond.

‘And it’s spring!’ said Vicki. She breathed deep of the fresh air, which

brought with it the scents of flowers and growing things, a nice change

from the inside of the TARDIS. took, there’s the Charles Bridge... and the

Petrin lookout tower, and — well, I don’t know any of those other

buildings, but it will be fun learning about them.’

‘It remains one of the more pleasant cities you humans have made,’

said the Doctor. ‘And the TARDIS has dropped us in the middle of the

University of Prague.’

‘In 2348,’ said Steven, a slight frown creasing his brow. ‘That date

rings a bell somehow, but I can’t quite —’

‘Welcome!’ called a number of enthusiastic voices from behind them.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Vicki, giggling at Steven’s surprise. ‘It’s just a

welcoming committee. They seem to think we’re here on purpose.’

‘No need to tell them otherwise,’ said the Doctor.

A group of people approached them. Though the robes they wore

were of different colours, they were basically of the same design and

gave the impression that they all worked for a common organisation and

purpose. ‘And welcome to the Charles University in Prague,’ said the

individual leading them, a tall man whose slightly stooped shoulders belied his height. ‘I am Professor Fox.’ He extended his right hand, which Steven took. ‘Welcome to the celebration of our one thousandth anniversary, following our founding in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV.’

‘Of courser said Steven. ‘Twenty-three forty-eight! It was on the tip of my tongue.’ He glanced at Vicki, who was looking at him dubiously. ‘It was so!’ he said.

‘No matter,’ said the Doctor, moving around Steven to take Professor Fox’s hand. ‘These are my fellow travellers, Vicki and Steven. And I am the Doctor.’

A slight gasp was heard, as though a stray puff of air had escaped the TARDIS. Professor Fox turned, with a tolerant smile, to the group of younger people who had followed him. ‘These are my graduate students,’ he said. ‘Did you wish to make a comment, Miss Childress?’

The heads of the students swivelled, like a row of puppets, to view a young woman who stood in the rear of the crowd. As she lowered the cowl of her student’s robe, a blush suffused her features, and she stammered slightly, under the collective gaze of her fellows.

It occurred to Steven that the phrase ‘young woman’ was not entirely accurate, for though the person Professor Fox referred to as ‘Miss Childress’ was by no means elderly, she was older than any of the other graduate students. The others exchanged a glance; some of them

laughed slightly among themselves.

Miss Childress's pale blue eyes swept over the crowd of graduate students, but swiftly returned to their visitors. 'We've heard of the Doctor,' she said, after a moment. 'It's a great honour to have you here, sir.' Her features, which were slightly pinched and wan, made an effort to underscore this sincerity with a smile. Though she stood in the midst of the crowd, it somehow seemed to Steven that Miss Childress was in the crowd, but not of the crowd. None of the other students seemed to care about her, or rarely even to notice her.

The Doctor nodded, as if Miss Childress's statement were an undeniable fact, and turned to Professor Fox.

'I say, that's a lovely necklace,' said Vicki. 'May I see it?'

The graduate student quickly put a hand to her throat, shielding the necklace she wore. It seemed to Steven quite beautiful, an intricate lacing of wiring and what almost looked like miniature circuitry.

'No!' said Miss Childress quickly. Then she looked at Vicki, her tone more civil. 'I'm sorry, but it's an... heirloom. Very old, been in my family for generations.'

'It doesn't look old,' said Vicki. 'It looks almost like a scientific device.'

'Well, it is an heirloom,' said Miss Childress, turning away.

'Are you expecting many more visitors, Professor?' asked the Doctor.

‘You’re some of the last to arrive,’ said Fox, leading them forward into the campus. ‘It won’t be long before the official celebration begins —

when the clock tolls.’ He extended a lean arm to a tall structure on the Old Town Hall.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor. ‘The Astronomical Clock. How good to see it again.’

‘Very impressive,’ nodded Steven.

‘That’s putting it mildly,’ said Vicki. ‘It’s extraordinary.’

The clock loomed over them, its two faces, one astronomical, the other a calendar face, ticking off the moments with endless, eternal precision.

‘Made in the year 1410,’ said the Doctor, with a satisfied nod, ‘though of course the astronomical dial was added later.’

‘What are those statues?’ asked Vicki, peering more closely at the clock. ‘Is that… Death?’

‘Yes, Death tolls the hour,’ said Professor Fox. ‘Perhaps a reminder to each of us to make all we can of our time.’

‘Reminds me of my father’s grandfather clock,’ said Steven. ‘All those wheels, constantly in motion…’

‘It’s rather more complex than a grandfather clock,’ came Miss Childress’s voice. The Doctor gave her a quick glance, and she moderated her tone. ‘It has three pointers, one each for the sun, the moon and the zodiac.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘It’s one of the oldest clocks of its kind in operation anywhere in the world. Building it gave Mikulas of Kadan and Jan Ondrejuv — called Sindel — the professor of mathematics and astronomy of Prague Charles University, a devil of a time.’

‘You speak as if you were there, Doctor,’ said one of the graduate students, and a chuckle rose from the crowd.

‘I suppose I do, don’t I?’ said the Doctor.

‘Of course, the university has had its share of famous educators, as well,’ continued Professor Fox. ‘Both Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe studied here. But none is more famous than Albert Einstein. From 1911 to 1912, he held the position of professor of theoretical physics at the Prague German University.’

‘Einstein,’ said the Doctor. ‘A brilliant mind indeed, once he was set straight on a few details concerning —’

Just then, a shrill cry shattered the pleasant bustle of the occasion.

‘My heavens, what’s that?’ asked Vicki.

‘Not sure, but it’s heading this way,’ said Steven.

All heads turned, to see attendants, discernible by their red uniforms, rushing through the crowd, seemingly in pursuit of something. Looking more closely, a small, furtive form could be seen darting in and out of the mass of attendants. Over confused shouts, a series of animal shrieks could be heard.

‘Look out!’ called Professor Fox.

‘Get him!’ called one of the graduate students.

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Steven dashed forward and made a grab for the elusive form, but

missed and landed on the ground. Fortunately for his pride, few seemed

to notice him in the commotion. The dark shape lit atop a tall trellis and

briefly came to rest, scratching itself and looking about in curiosity and

fear.

‘It’s a monkey!’ shouted someone, in delight.

‘How clever of the university,’ said another.

Was that your idea, Professor?’ asked the Doctor, eyeing the primate.

‘Not at all,’ whispered Professor Fox. ‘I’ve no idea where it came from.

But if the crowd thinks it’s part of the celebration, fine. As long as they

don’t panic.’

‘Here, come here, little one,’ said Miss Childress. She stepped

forward, producing a piece of fruit, taken from one of the pockets of her

robe, and offering it to the animal.

The monkey’s nostrils widened, and it eyed the fruit suspiciously,

peered all about, as if suspecting a trap, then climbed down into Miss

Childress’s arms, grabbing the fruit greedily.

‘Excellent work, Jane,’ said the Professor, under his breath. ‘What

shall we do with it? It might have escaped from one of the labs, but—'

'There's a room in the clock tower where we can put it,' said Miss Childress. 'It'll be safe there until its rightful place can be found.'

'Yes,' said Fox. Jimson, the caretaker can watch him until after the — what in blazes?' Suddenly, the monkey, for seemingly no reason, pulled free of Miss Childress's grip and lurched towards Professor Fox with a screech.

'He's excited by all these people, I imagine,' said Miss Childress, retrieving the animal. 'I'll be off with him, then.'

'Very well, but hurry, the ceremony is about to start,' said Professor Fox.

'Steven,' said the Doctor, in a low voice, 'go with her.'

'But, Doctor, why?'

'"Why"? Because I tell you to! Now go! Go with her and see if anything's amiss.'

'All right,' said Steven. He glanced at Vicki with a shrug, as if to say, 'Anything to humour the old man,' then caught up with Miss Childress.

'Here, let me give you a hand with that creature. I've had a little experience coping with them in my time in the space programme.'

'Thanks, but it's not necessary,' said Miss Childress, turning abruptly away from him.

'Still, another pair of hands might come in handy,' said Steven, remembering that many of the Doctor's hunches had proven correct

before. ‘I could use a tour of the campus, myself.’

‘After all these years, I certainly know my way around,’ said Miss Childress.

‘That sounds like there’s a story to be told,’ said Steven, turning on

the charm.

‘Oh, not really,’ said Miss Childress with a wan smile. She stroked the fur of the monkey, who had relaxed in her arms. ‘It’s just that after all the years I’ve been here, a little recognition would be nice. Lord knows I’ve seen every other teaching assistant in my department promoted ahead of me.’ She shook her head, and lines of anger creased her pinched features. ‘You’ve no idea what it’s like to be surrounded by inferior intellects.’

‘Now you sound like the Doctor in one of his moods,’ said Steven. ‘If you have a chance to talk to him, I promise you you won’t regard him as an inferior intellect.’

‘Perhaps not yet,’ said Miss Childress.

‘What?’ asked Steven. ‘What do you mean by —?’

‘In here,’ she said, as they neared the base of the clock tower.

On one side of an inner corridor was an unmarked door, hanging ajar. It opened onto a nearly bare storeroom; light leaked into it through a dirty window.

‘That’s how you got out, wasn’t it?’ said Miss Childress, as she neared the door. ‘The latch fell open.’

‘Got out?’ asked Steven, following her inside. ‘Has it been here before?’ A tangy mixture of odours filled the close space.

‘Of course not,’ she said with a forced laugh.

‘It certainly smells like he’s been here before.’

‘Well, he hasn’t.’ The monkey leaped to the floor, looked around, then began to screech, in panic and fear. ‘Let’s go, back to —’

‘What’s the matter with him?’ asked Steven. Then he spied a splash of bright colour in one corner of the room. Approaching it, he picked up a red uniform. Over the pocket of the tunic was stitched the name Jimson.

‘Jimson?’ said Steven. ‘Isn’t that the name of the caretaker Professor Fox mentioned? This looks pretty suspicious.’

‘I assure you, Jimson is quite well,’ said Miss Childress, from behind him.

‘But this isn’t normal,’ began Steven.

‘Nothing about today is normal,’ said Miss Childress, with a smile.

She picked a thick piece of wood from a pile of debris and turned to the monkey, who cowered in a corner. ‘Is it — Jimson?’

The monkey’s eyes widened as it peered at her, as if trying to remember something far, far beyond the capacity of its meagre brain.

‘Jimson?’ asked Steven. ‘What do you mean? And what are you doing with that piece of wood? You’re not going to club the poor

creature!’

‘Not him, no,’ said Miss Childress, swinging the cudgel.

‘Don’t!’ shouted Steven, as the club struck the side of his head with a

sickening impact. He fell, choked back a jet of bile, rolled to one side and

tried to clamber to his feet, but he seemed to have trouble getting his

balance...

Will you please stay still?’ demanded Miss Childress, bringing the

club down again.

Steven fell to the floor, unconscious.

* * *

‘Assembled guests,’ said Professor Fox from a small dais, ‘please

prepare to celebrate the one thousandth anniversary of the founding of

this university.’ The crowd murmured, glancing at the Astronomical Clock

as attendants passed out glasses of champagne. ‘When the clock strikes

noon,’ said Fox, ‘the university’s one thousandth year will officially begin.’

‘Some champagne, Doctor?’ asked Vicki, taking two glasses from the

tray of a passing attendant.

‘No,’ said the Doctor, peering about the crowd, ‘and none for you,

either. Keep your wits about you, young lady.’

‘Why?’ asked Vicki, taking a surreptitious sip before surrendering the

glass.

‘I don’t like this situation one bit. Why hasn’t Steven returned?’

‘I don’t see why you sent him after Miss Childress anyway.’

‘Use your head, girl,’ said the Doctor. ‘Why should that graduate student have been carrying fruit about to ply that monkey with unless she thought she might have reason to use it?’

‘Maybe it was her lunch.’

‘No one brings their lunch to a catered affair like this. Oh, I admit it’s all very vague, but —’ Suddenly the Doctor straightened, his brows rising, as if the recipient of an electric shock. ‘Of courser He turned to Vicki, who knew well enough to pay attention when the Doctor was alarmed.

‘What is it, Doctor?’

‘Quickly! Back to the TARDIS! Before —’

At that moment, the clock struck. The figure of Death drew back its arms and swung, sending its tolls booming out across the campus.

At first, the multitude began to applaud. Teachers, students and well-wishers alike joined in an outpouring of acclaim for such a splendid anniversary.

Then things began to change. The expressions of all within range of the clock’s tones began to dim, to grow duller, like a candle’s flame placed in the path of a breeze.

And the mechanism of the Prague Astronomical Clock began to reverse, to run backward.

Vicki shook her head, she suddenly felt quite drowsy. It became difficult to think, as if her head was full of cotton wool. She rubbed her eyes — then gaped in shock as she saw her hands. Her fingers seemed to be becoming thicker, perhaps shorter, less delicate. And the thin, fair

hair on the backs of her hands seemed to be growing thicker, darker, more coarse, as though she no longer had hands, but —

She shook her head and looked at the crowd of celebrants, hoping she had simply had a little too much champagne. But the rest of the crowd was acting much as she was, beginning to stumble, to look about with expressions of dull dread. And the posture of each person was becoming more stooped, as if it was becoming more and more difficult for them to walk erect, as their features seemed to compress, become more squat, primitive, brutish...

She turned, looking for the Doctor. Surely he would be able to stop this madness, to calm her fears, to —

But even the Doctor was acting strangely. He was staring down at his hands, which, unlike hers, seemed to be growing longer and somewhat thinner. Vicki looked at him beseechingly, trying to find some comfort or reassurance in his straightforward gaze...

... but her heart nearly stopped as she saw in his eyes, for the first

time, fear.

Then Vicki knew nothing else but curiosity and fear as all rational thought left her head.

The Doctor lurched forward, towards the clock tower, trying to concentrate on the task at hand. Miss Childress's plan was obvious now,

and quite dibo — diac — diabolical, he realised, but there was still hope,

still a factor she hadn't counted on...

... if there was time.

It was difficult for the Doctor to remain on his hind legs, such a temptation to fall and slither forward on all fours. But he knew that walking on his hind legs, as a man, was all that was keeping the task foremost in his mind...

... or what was left of his mind.

The Doctor moved forward as quickly as he could manage, though it was like trying to run through quicksand.

All around, apes.

Grunting.

Yammering.

Paws, grabbing at him.

Hands not working right.

Fingers... merging, into flippers or perhaps tentacles.

Mind... his precious mind... so fuzzy...

... why couldn't he think...?

The creature that had been the Doctor now lurched to the door of the clock tower and, managing to grasp the doorknob with what had been hands, pulled it open with tortuous slowness.

Something to do... but what...?

Somewhere... animal... howling.

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Follow noise... somehow important...

The creature that had been the Doctor saw a figure in a robe moving rapidly about the clock tower.

In a room... monkey... and a gorilla...

... danger... must avoid...

In the corner... a flash of colour.

... pretty.

A pretty colour.

Follow...

The prehistoric creature that had been the Doctor followed the pretty colour up a ladder to a larger room.

Touch colour... pretty colour...

An appendage was extended, and there was a shriek.

'Oh, it's you, is it... Doctor?' Miss Childress's eyes squinted as she peered at the creature before her, yanking her robe free of the thing's grasp. 'I must say, I hadn't expected that — but live and learn, eh?' She laughed unpleasantly.

Sound painful. Voice... and strange box... by ticking thing... buzzing...

hurt...

Miss Childress moved towards the mechanism, examined it, then

turned back to that which had been the Doctor, smiling with no humour.

'I'd explain the workings of my machine — I call it the devolution wave —

to you if I thought you could understand it,' she said, 'but you can't. All

that matters is that soon I'll be the only person at Charles University who

can. Finally, after years of enduring the insults of people who were

promoted past me, people who had not one particle of my intelligence, I'll

be the most intelligent person at this school — and, eventually, in the

world. Actually, I always was. But now, no one will be able to deny it.'

Her head tilted, with an almost feline curiosity.

'Just what are you, anyway? I shall have a fine time dissecting you to

determine precisely what —'

More noise... painful... must stop...

The creature that had been the Doctor suddenly threw its bulk

forward, seizing Miss Childress, slamming her to one side, then

launching itself at the noisy box of wires. Something gave beneath the

creature's weight, and the box began to spark and burn, issuing a cloud

of acrid smoke, which caused the creature to pull back in fear.

NOV Miss Childress's shriek sounded much like those heard on the

campus outside. ‘Stop that!’

But the thing that had been the Doctor was already changing, ascending the evolutionary ladder. He felt his mind growing clearer, stronger.

Just a few more seconds…

But Miss Childress reached into her robe and produced a handheld device that she aimed at the Doctor.

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‘Stay back! I think you can understand that! This version of my ray got Jimson out of my way, and I’m sure it will work just as well on you.’ She glanced sideways at the hissing box. ‘Just a little damage,’ she said, ‘easy to repair, to continue the process until it’s irreversible.’ Her hands tightened on the small device; it began to glow. ‘As you’re about to find out, Doctor. Good —’

Suddenly, a small bundle of hair and teeth burst into the room like a furry thunderbolt, slamming into Miss Childress, causing her to drop the ray device, which clattered across the floor.

The monkey that had been Jimson jumped up and down, chattering at the top of its lungs.

‘Blast you, Jimson, when I —’ Miss Childress’s thin hands reached out for her ray device… but before she could attain it, a paw seized it.

The monkey that had been Jimson lifted the device, peering at it

curiously, waving it around the room. It made pretty colours as it did so,

the thing that had been the Doctor noted.

Miss Childress's hand went automatically to her throat, her features

going through their own changes, becoming at first worried, then

horrified. 'My necklace,' she said. 'Where is it? It's my defense against —'

From a tentacle of the creature that was becoming the Doctor hung

Miss Childress's necklace. A tentacle swung the necklace it held against

a wall; its intricate circuitry sent forth pretty sparks and hissed, now quite

useless. The creature flung it further away, knowing somehow the

woman must not regain it.

'No, Jimson,' said Miss Childress, now most concerned with the

device in the monkey's hands. She spoke slowly, but an undercurrent of

fear was now heard in her voice. 'Give it to me. To *me*.'

And Jimson obeyed, in a way. He shined the device's eerie beam

directly on her.

'No!' she shouted, as she began to shrink, to hunch, to grow hairier.

Seconds later, she stopped shouting and began screeching like the

animal she now was, shrugging free of the encumbering robe.

The Doctor, rapidly returning to his usual self, shook his head, his

mind clearing just in time to see the form of that which had been Miss

Childress dwindling, becoming first an ape, then a fish, then a kind of

protozoa...

Then, finally, a spot of brilliant light which hovered in the air for a moment, like an errant star, before expanding and disappearing, like a soap bubble.

The monkey that had been Jimson, looking for new entertainment, began to swing the ray about the room — until a strong hand grasped the monkey's wrist. Shocked, the anthropoid released the device and scampered across the room.

'I think we've all had enough of *that*,' said the Doctor, switching the device off.

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Vicki's eyes opened to see the Doctor, Steven and a rather bewildered middle-aged man wearing a uniform whose tag read 'Jimson' approaching her. As she stirred, Steven broke into a run.

'Vicki!' he cried, lifting her to her feet. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' she began slowly, 'except for a mild headache, I suppose I am.'

'You're lucky to have only a mild headache.'

'What happened to you? Doctor, what happened to us all?'

The Doctor, straightening his tie, looked about him. Across the campus, celebrants were picking themselves up from the ground and peering at each other curiously, shaking their heads as though awakening from a long nap and a strange, unpleasant dream.

'Doctor?' called a voice. They all turned to see Professor Fox and his graduate students approaching. 'Are you all right? Where's Miss

Childress?'

'I believe we won't be seeing anything more of Miss Childress — not for some time, anyway. And if and when we do, I hope she'll be a happier person than she was the last time we saw her.'

'Yes,' began Professor Fox, 'but.: He shook his head, as if to gather his thoughts, took one look at the Doctor and nodded, moving away. 'Yes, Doctor, thank you.'

'What did happen to her?' asked Vicki, as she, Steven and the Doctor approached the TARDIS. Memories were beginning to return, and she listened with interest to the Doctor's story.

'She discovered, ultimately,' said the Doctor, some minutes later, 'that she was a talented inventor, but flawed as a researcher. She acted as though she knew of me, but she didn't stop to consider — if she ever knew — that though you humans are my very favourite species, I'm not

one of you, not really. My people are humanoid, but not human. My species has existed much longer than yours, evolved many more millennia than yours. Miss Childress's contraption took that much longer

to affect me, so I was able to foil her plans, just barely. She hadn't counted on that.'

Suddenly, a loud booming was heard across the campus. For a moment, all froze in their tracks, looking about, startled.

Then they all smiled with relief as they realised it was just the Prague Astronomical Clock chiming another hour, as it had for centuries.

As they climbed aboard the TARDIS and the familiar bellows-noise

enveloped them, Vicki asked, ‘Doctor, you said Miss Childress devolved

into... into a spot of light?’

The Doctor turned from the controls to look at her solemnly. ‘A very

brief, but very beautiful spot of light, my child. Why do you ask?’

Vicki shrugged as if it was of no matter, but her eyes were grave. ‘I

wonder if that’s what the universe looked like the moment it was born?’

The Doctor was silent for a long moment. ‘That’s what Miss Childress

may now be finding out,’ he said softly.

Strange Attractor

Paul Kupperberg

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor,

with Peri Brown

‘Does this,’ the Doctor said, pausing every few words to sip at the

thick, aromatic brew in the delicate china cup that he held ever so

precisely between thumb and forefinger, ‘sound familiar: "If I must" —’ sip

‘— "to war, with coffee" —’ sip ‘— "shall I march"?’

Peri put down her own coffee cup and looked across the café table at

her companion. She couldn’t help but wonder what the rest of the world

made of this person. On the surface, clad in his customary garb of a

crazy quilt Edwardian coat of many colours, brown velvet waistcoat, gold

chequered pants and oversized floppy red bow tie with white polka dots,

those passing by in the busy square must take him for somebody’s dotty

uncle. A quick look at his face, all round and wide-eyed, ringed by an

unruly halo of burnt golden curls, only enhanced that first but very wrong

impression.

It was the eyes that finally set you straight. They blazed with curiosity,

smouldered with the light of intelligence and when he spoke, once you

learned how to translate the chaotic synaptic tangle of his thought processes, all doubt was removed. He was the Doctor, the ‘universal’ Doctor, as he liked to call himself because that was easier than explaining that he was not of the world but a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey.

‘No. Are you off to war?’ she asked him.

‘Well, one never knows, does one?’ the Doctor said absently, glancing around the plaza. ‘Anything is possible in this day and age.’

This age — Peri wasn’t sure of the exact day, although from the nip in the afternoon air she guessed it was late October, give or take a week — was 2781, almost eight hundred years beyond her native twentieth century. The place was a café in Prague, Old Town Square, at the bend in the Vltava River across from the Old Summer Palace Belvedere in the Czech Republic of the Eastern European Confederation.

‘So who said it? That coffee thing?’

‘That was me. Please do pay attention.’ The Doctor tipped back his coffee cup and noisily drained the last of his espresso. He smacked his lips in satisfaction and said, ‘I think another is called for. Waiter!’

The robo-server clanked up to the table. ‘A refill, if you will, my good simulacrum,’ the Doctor said. The server wheezed and groaned, taking the empty cup and inserting it into the cavity in its chest. One high-pitched whine, coughing hiss and plume of coffee-scented smoke later, it

produced a refilled cup that was placed before its appreciative customer.

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‘Ah! Coffee, as Alexander Pope said, which makes the politician

wise.’ The Doctor lifted his cup and sipped.

‘If that’s true, I’d say this era’s a few coffee beans short of a full cup.’

Peri glanced skyward to the dome of criss-crossing energies that arched

over the city, flickering and shimmering like a monochromatic aurora

borealis. Though it didn’t quite block out the sky, it left the day feeling

oppressively dim and grey. Of course, while it filtered out the light it also

kept at bay the various destructive devices and energies that the three

European factions lobbed at one another in this latest war. In theory,

Prague was a neutral zone, an open city where enemies who would

otherwise be at one another’s throats mingled in uneasy peace while

weaving their intricate tapestries of politics, diplomacy and betrayal. But

missiles and bombs and space-based quantum weapons were, even in

this technologically advanced age, prone to malfunction and the vagaries

of human incompetence. Better dreary and safe than sunny and sorry,

she thought.

‘Actually, the era happens to has at least two particularly brilliant

politicians,’ the Doctor said. ‘Not in my league, it goes without saying, but

wise enough in their own ways. Couldn't say if they drink coffee, though

they'd be fools not to, but they happen to be representing their respective

factions in negotiations to end this current conflict in talks being held right

here and now in Prague.'

'That's good.'

'Yes, though it would be far better if they held their talks elsewhere

seeing as how Prague will cease to exist,' he said, pulling a pocket watch

from his waistcoat, 'mere moments from now.'

Peri straightened in her seat. 'Excuse me? Cease to exist, as in,

obliterated in an attack?'

'Don't be silly. Prague is off-limits. You know that. Besides, the force

field is more than ample to keep conventional weaponry from getting

through. No, I meant "cease to exist" as in "disappearing from the face of

the Earth as though it had never been".'

'How is that possible? Shouldn't we be doing something?' Peri was

quite sure she didn't want to be sitting here when the chair in which she

sat and everything around it vanished from reality.

'We are,' the Doctor said. He finished his coffee and, with a deep sigh

of satisfaction, patted his lips with a napkin. 'We're waiting.'

Peri sat back and folded her arms across her chest. 'Oh, no you

don't,' she said. 'I'm not letting you suck me into an endless round of

questions and vague answers. If you don't want to tell me what we're supposed to be doing here, I can always go back to the TARDIS and wait for you there.'

'We're to make certain that an anomalous reading in the time stream is nothing more than that,' the Doctor said. He held up a finger and cocked his head to one side. 'There. It's happened. Did you feel that?'

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'I didn't feel a thing.'

But something had changed, Peri realised. The sky had perceptibly and instantaneously darkened and the sun, dimly visible earlier through the protective energy dome, had a moment ago been creeping westward to set, now appeared to hang low on the horizon. To the... south?

'Wait,' Peri said uneasily.

The Doctor smiled in reassurance and sat back. 'Nothing to worry about at all. Prague has simply fallen into a temporary autonomous zone, or a TAZ, which is a bubble in time-space. A temporal hiccup, if you will, that occupies its own temporary, as the name states so baldly, reality, usually for no more than ten or 15 minutes of subjective time. A TAZ then snaps back into real time, returning everything to its rightful place in the march of time as though the TAZ never occurred. It is, by definition, a self- obliterating event.'

‘And the sun moving around the sky?’ Peri said.

‘Don’t be silly. The sun is right where it’s always been. It’s the Earth that’s on a different axial orientation,’ he said. ‘Truth to tell, Prague is particularly susceptible to these zones. You know why it’s called the City of Bridges, don’t you?’

‘I’m guessing it’s got something to do with all the bridges spanning the Vltava River?’ Peri said absently. The plaza was different too, she noticed, now that the planet having moved without her being aware alerted her to be on the look out for other subtle changes. The buildings surrounding it suddenly showed their age, façades cracked and sagging with gaping holes where collapsed sections were left to form piles of rubble. The elegantly attired diplomats and dignitaries and sharp-creased military personnel who had formerly marched this way and that like people on missions were gone as well, replaced by a ragtag collection of grimy individuals that she would not have been able to swear were entirely human. Or human as she had always known.

‘Fourteen bridges, to be exact. And one might think that to be the reason but one would be wrong. Prague’s long been a nexus, a bridge, so to speak, between worlds and times. The universal Quantum Ley Lines intersect right there,’ the Doctor said, pointing across the river at the Old Summer Palace Belvedere. ‘Rather explains the city’s reputation

for intrigue and mystery.'

'Okay, so Prague hiccups in time, the universe takes an antacid, and

everything goes back to normal. Then what?'

'Normally, nothing. Of course, anything is possible while the TAZ is in

effect. The flow of time may be altered, evolution could take a turn for the

bizarre, or the planet may find itself somewhat haphazardly relocated.'

The Doctor stared forlornly into his cup. 'All terrible, but thanks to the

TAZ's rather elastic nature, hardly fatal. Unless.' He paused for dramatic

effect or, quite possibly, to ponder the idea of ordering another coffee,

which at any point was impossible, since the café no longer shared this

existence with them.

Peri leaned forward and impatiently plucked the china cup from his

hand. 'This is where the other shoe drops, isn't it?'

'With rather a loud crash, yes. Unless, he said, 'time does not snap

back.'

'I thought you said it always does.'

'Until now, yes, it has.'

'So what's changed?'

'Well, the previously mentioned anomaly for one.' The Doctor frowned

and shifted his gaze to look past Peri. 'And him, for another.'

Peri jumped from her chair and spun around. All things considered,

he was nowhere near as terrible as she expected. He was, in point of

fact, exceedingly ordinary, which, considering he could very well be the

cause of the destruction of an entire planet, struck her as ridiculous.

Walking across the plaza towards them was a man... well, a humanoid,

at any rate, of average height and weight, with features that were neither

handsome nor bland. His dark hair was long and fine and blew about his

ordinary face in the chill breeze that swept the darkening plaza. His garb

was the most distinctive thing about him, all of the same off-white that

shimmered in a way that made Peri think it wasn't any sort of cloth,

pants, shirt and duster all flowing together as if of a single piece.

'Who is he?' Peri asked, moving closer to the Doctor.

The Doctor shrugged. 'How the devil am I supposed to know?' he

asked testily, then called out to the man, 'You! Who are you?'

He stopped, less than ten feet separating them. 'I am that which is,'

he said in a strangely accented voice.

'Yes, well, most biblical, thank you very much,' the Doctor said, 'but

hardly informative. I've come eight hundred years to meet you. The least

you can do is provide a name.'

'I am systemic disorder,' he said. 'I am the state of uncertainty.' There

was no expression on his face, no inflection to his voice.

'I'll just call you Schrödinger, then,' the Doctor said.

Something in the corner of the bland face twitched — a smile? ‘I have no need of a name. I am,’ he said, spreading his hands, ‘a universal state.’

‘Systemic disorder. Uncertainty,’ the Doctor mused. He glanced at Peri and raised an eyebrow. ‘Anarchy?’

‘Don’t look at me,’ she said. Around her, the air seemed to grow colder. She thought it might be fear, but, no, her breath showed white in the air. The temperature was falling and falling quickly.

‘That will suffice,’ Anarchy said with a nod. Over his shoulder, the north face of the neo-Renaissance Rudolfinum Concert Hall, which had stood in the Old Town since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, crumbled suddenly and slid from towering magnificence to twisted rubble in a slow motion avalanche of man-made scree. The tatterdemalion

beings wandering the plaza paid it no heed and wandered on through the billowing cloud of dust that crept across the cracked and worn cobblestones from the collapse.

Peri gasped and jumped back. The Doctor placed a steadying hand on her forearm, never taking his eyes off Anarchy and said, ‘This temporary autonomous zone, I gather, is responsible for your presence here.’ Anarchy nodded. ‘Yes. The energies here are strong.’

‘They feed you?’

‘They sustain me and I, in turn, sustain them.’

The ground under Peri’s feet quivered, shifting and shrinking away from around the plaza’s cobblestones. The millennium-old stones heaved up from the now desiccated earth.

‘What’s happening, Doctor?’ she whispered fiercely. Nothing felt right any more, not the ground beneath her feet, not the air she breathed, not even the beating of her own heart.

‘Entropy is happening,’ he said. ‘You know what that is, Peri?’

The girl focused on the question so she didn’t have to think about why it was being asked. ‘Um, entropy. We covered that in a physics course… it’s the tendency of energy to degrade or disperse, right? Like, an unburned piece of wood has lower entropy than its ashes, burnt remains and the heat left over after its been burned.’

‘Simply but accurately put,’ the Doctor said. Anarchy seemed little interested in the Doctor or Peri, much less their conversation. ‘This one would appear to be a physical manifestation of that concept, drawn to the unpredictability of the TAZ, which, I imagine because of its self-annihilating properties, is a strong source of entropic energies.’

‘Got it,’ Peri said, but seeing as how the cobblestones were now crumbling, breaking first into smaller chunks that, like some bit of super-speed stop-motion film, disintegrated to dust, she wasn’t about to ask for

clarification even if she hadn't. She was just the Doctor's sounding board

anyway, someone to talk at while he worked his way through concepts

that she would doubtless need years to grasp.

'Entropy. Anarchy. Chaos,' he murmured. 'Seemingly random but

actually predictable.'

'Entropy. Anarchy. Chaos,' Anarchy repeated and looked over at the

Doctor. 'We are at the intersection of many quantum forces.' At some

point while he was speaking Anarchy stopped being where he was and

began being over... there, in the arched doorway of a dilapidated

apartment building on the southern edge of the plaza, his voice echoing

across the cold, dark place that had become the entire world.

'Don't tell me you predicted that,' Peri said.

'No,' the Doctor admitted, 'but it shouldn't be a surprise. We're in a

pocket of time that by its very nature is not bound by the usual rules, with

a being of quantum abilities representing the ultimate disintegration of all

systems of order. This is all really quite basic.'

Peri wasn't ready to be impressed by the situation's simplicity. In

ways she couldn't even begin to explain, she grew aware that things as

she knew them were now different but were as they had always been.

She felt like she was in an elevator that was falling too fast. Her head

was light, her stomach lighter. Reality, things as simple as up and down,

made sense in a whole different way except things didn't change like

that, that fast but that's how they'd always been. No. Wait, that wasn't

right. This is how it's always been. Or was it this? She closed her eyes

and tried to think other thoughts. 'Why's he doing this? What happens if

the TAZ doesn't self-annihilate?'

'He does what he does because it is his nature. He is neither evil nor

malicious, he just is. And if the TAZ isn't permitted to go away, it will

grow like a tumour and make all time-space ill and, eventually, die.'

Anarchy was fascinated by the shifting world around himself,

observing the process on some level the nature of which Peri couldn't

even begin to understand. She was having enough trouble just focusing

on him, always just off in her peripheral vision but never quite there,

where she expected to see him.

There was a sound in the air, under the ragged rush of wind that blew

decay across the world, like the hum of a million tyres on a distant road.

That wasn't a good sound, Peri knew. It was the sound of time passing at

an unimaginable pace, quantum physics and chaos theory and the

tendency of systems to decay all driving forward in this cordoned-off

pocket of *here*, a bubble of *now* rapidly running out of time.

And the Doctor said, 'Shut your eyes, Peri.'

Peri shut her eyes. 'Why?'

‘Because they were spinning and distracting me. And because the observation of an event on the quantum level changes the outcome of the event,’ the Doctor said, closing his own eyes. ‘No peeking.’

‘I don’t—’

‘You know the old saying,’ the Doctor said. ‘"The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa." The Uncertainty Principle of dear old Dr Heisenberg. You can’t be certain of two things at the same time.’

Peri frowned and felt her body sway to the hum of onrushing oblivion. ‘That’s not right.’

The Doctor sucked in a sharp breath. ‘No, it isn’t,’ he said. ‘What am I thinking? You can only *precisely measure* one or the other, yes?’

‘You’re asking *me*?’ Peri said, focusing everything on the comforting darkness inside her eyelids. ‘You’re the one who’s supposed to know everything.’

‘So I am,’ the Doctor grumbled under his breath. ‘Wait here.’

A snarky retort concerning the lack of anywhere else to go came to mind but Peri decided to keep it to herself. She did not want their final exchange to be yet another round of pointless verbal sparring.

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Cautiously, she opened one eye and watched as he straightened his back and strode towards their antagonist.

Anarchy stood a placid observer in the centre of the square. Reality

had, it seemed to her, taken on a certain *solidity* she had never noticed before.

Perhaps it was the acceleration of time compressing the seconds/minutes/ hours into something tangible that allowed Anarchy's presence to affect it. Maybe it was just her imagination, of which she had, as her stepfather never seemed to tire of reminding her, an overabundance. Whatever the reason, if felt as though reality was contracting around her, drawing all that ever was and ever would be down from the heavens and concentrating it in the here and now of this place. Like a piece of rotting fruit, shrinking and withering in decay.

The Doctor reached out to touch the ethereally clad arm of Anarchy, which, true to the quantum nightmare in which they were trapped, was elsewhere when the Time Lord's hand arrived. The Doctor spun, seeking the elusive being, who stood now atop a pile of rubble turning to dust that was swept away in the wind and who, as soon as his position was noted, became an indistinct blur of indeterminate activity.

Peri drew her coat tighter against the gathering cold. The Doctor could only sigh as he began his tromp across the plaza, through the wind-blown rain of decaying matter, to the new location, calling out, 'Now see here.' She turned her head, refusing to see Anarchy here, there or anywhere else. As soon as her eyes slid from the white-clad being she

knew, with ironclad certainty, exactly where he was. When she glanced

at that place, however, he was no longer there but, interestingly, she

became aware of exactly what it was he was doing.

The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the

momentum is known.

For all the good knowing either thing did her.

After several more moments of chasing Anarchy's where and what,

the Doctor apparently arrived at the same conclusion. He stopped dead

in his tracks, surrounded by decay and the cold of an ecosystem

spiralling down to entropy. It felt as though they had been in this pocket

of time gone awry forever, but Peri knew it had been only minutes, those

little subjective units of temporal measurement that were rapidly running

out of any meaning whatsoever. The Doctor began to slowly turn in a

circle, the brow beneath his mop of pale golden curls furrowed in

thought. After a few moments of this leisurely pirouette, he raised his left

arm straight out before him and began wiggling his fingers like a toddler

waving farewell.

'Ah!' he cried out at last, his fingers closing into a fist around some

something that Peri could not see.

The Doctor smiled now and, keeping his clenched fist extended

before him, strode purposefully forward, across what remained of the

old

plaza and onto the approach of the Mánesüv Bridge. The once solid

stone structure seemed one strong gust of wind away from tumbling into

the dried and cracked riverbed below but its hazardous condition didn't

seem to bother the Doctor in the least. Instead, he made his way to the

centre of the span, ignoring the final disintegration of the Prague Castle

behind him on the opposite shore, and, feeling about himself with his

right hand, grasped yet another invisible something and brought his two

fists together.

Watching the Doctor, Peri had lost sight of Anarchy, but he was there

now, on the bridge with the Doctor, directly before the Time Lord's

outstretched clenched fists.

'That's much better,' the Doctor said. 'Silly of me not to have thought

of this sooner. Quantum Ley Lines all about us and still I waste the few

precious moments available to me chasing after you like a kitten after a

ball of twine.'

'Entropy can not be denied,' Anarchy said.

'But it can be delayed, if only for a short while by an attractor, such as

myself, creating a close but slightly disturbed point in the trajectory of the

decaying system,' the Doctor said. He nodded at his clenched fists. 'Like

so, suspended between intersecting Leys, halting the process.'

Anarchy regarded the Doctor with an expression approaching

curiosity.

'Yes.'

'Besides,' the Doctor continued, 'I find your entire existence to be

quite preposterous, if you really must know.'

'The forces of which entropy is the ultimate expression came into

being before you ever were and will continue long after you cease to be.'

'I'm not saying I don't believe in entropy, or gravity, or

electromagnetism or any other universal force, for that matter,' the

Doctor said. 'Just you. The physical manifestation of entropy. I mean,

really.'

Anarchy held up his hands to encompass the dark, torn skies and

broken, decayed world.

'Yes, yes, yes,' the Doctor said impatiently. 'You managed to crumble

this poor little TAZ to dust. How very impressive. But the idea that

entropy, what you call the universe's "ultimate expression", would retain

coherence in the face of decay is, you must admit, fairly ludicrous. Am I

expected to believe that an otherwise logical universe would stand still

for so great a contradiction?'

'I am systemic disorder. I am the state of uncertainty.'

The Doctor stepped forward and bumped his outstretched fists into Anarchy's chest.

'You feel quite certain to me.'

Anarchy wavered, like a filmstrip missing several random frames.

'Look, perhaps you *are* what you claim to be,' the Doctor said with a

shrug. 'But the representation of the degradation and dispersal of energy

should be less... well, *ordered*, don't you think?'

The freezing winds of decay began to blow anew, whipping past Peri and rushing towards the two figures on the Mánesüv Bridge. Anarchy took a step back from the Doctor and the wind engulfed him. He welcomed the cold, throwing back his head and flinging his arms wide in

embrace of it. The dust and debris in the whirlwind momentarily obscured the white- clad figure, but she saw soon enough what was happening: that the flesh and muscle and bone were being flayed from Anarchy's form by the wind and the cold and dispersing, like Prague had

been around them, into entropic waste.

And the air filled with a deep and long and contented sigh and then the sun was back on the eastern horizon.

Peri gasped and stumbled, falling against a passing Eastern European Confederation military officer. The man steadied her. 'Are you

all right, ma'am?' he asked.

She shook her head and looked around — at the Mánesüv Bridge and Prague Palace, both standing and well maintained, at the nearly centuries- old Rudolfinum Concert Hall, at the rest of the old city. All as she remembered it, circa AD 2781.

'Yes,' she breathed at last. 'I_ I'm fine, thank you.'

The officer tipped his hat and moved on as the Doctor strolled from the bridge and joined her. 'A friend of yours?' he asked.

'What happened?' she gasped.

'What we came to make happen. The TAZ self-annihilated, as is its wont, and time is back on track.'

'So he... where did he go?'

'Dust in the wind,' the Doctor smiled. 'I merely pointed out that entropy should follow its own natural course and, well, entropy. It wasn't the entropic process itself causing the problem but rather the presence of its physical manifestation. Once that went the way of all things, following its own rather obvious destiny, if you will, the anomaly was removed and the TAZ could run its natural course.'

'So that's it? It's over?'

'Over and done.'

'But he went so easily.'

'I told you, he wasn't malicious or deliberately destructive. This wasn't a creature of intellect and guile, but a quantum concept that somehow

acquired substance and form. He was, as he said, what he was. And now, he isn't.'

Peri said, 'So what happens now?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'The universe spins on towards entropy, albeit at a saner, more leisurely pace, the war continues, the peace talks go on, and we hope humanity doesn't do on its own what we just prevented.'

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'What if he comes back?' Peri asked.

'Well, since the TAZ is a self-annihilating event, that which we just experienced never actually happened, so he can't return.'

'That's a relief.'

'Yes, were he to manifest again, it would be, technically, his first appearance.'

Peri's eyes went wide. 'What?'

'Who was it who said,' the Doctor asked, glancing distractedly about the crowded plaza, '"Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it,

doesn't go away"?' And, without waiting for an answer, the Doctor walked off, back towards their table at the café. 'Ahh, one last coffee before we go.'

Peri grinned and yelled, 'Dick!'

The Doctor turned, one eyebrow raised and a small smile on his lips. 'Philip K. Dick. That's absolutely correct.'

She nodded and marched to catch up with him. ‘I think I’ll have that coffee now.’

Gold and Black Ooze

Robert Hood

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor,

with Peri Brown

It is said that the Viennese alchemist Richthausen used a grain of red powder obtained from his friend Busardier to transmute two and a half pounds of mercury into gold. The Emperor, who witnessed the event, had a medal made of the gold, engraved with the legend 'The Divine Metamorphosis, exhibited at Prague 15 January 1648, in the presence of his Imperial Majesty Ferdinand III'. It did not change the world a great deal.

Echoes of his own footsteps in the empty streets of Prague were far more chilling to Slobeslav Stojespal than the cold weather itself. An icy wind drifted in from the outer darkness but mere meteorological variation was nothing to worry about. There had always been cold and though it exacerbated the pain in his joints it was an unavoidable fact of existence.

His own fear was the thing that gave him pause. This was his city and it was a great city, perhaps the greatest city that had ever existed and one that he firmly believed had an even greater destiny ahead of it. He

should feel safe in it. He should feel proud. That he felt neither safe nor

proud drove nails into his heart and now provoked him into an awkward

run.

He knew he was too old for this sort of exertion. In no time at all, his

breathing became desperate, his gut began to spasm, and the

rheumatism in his right leg made him stumble to a halt. He leaned

against a damp, rough-hewn wall, keen to find solace in its ancient

strength. But all he gained was an increase in his sense of bleak

inevitability.

He fumbled a watch from his pocket. Held it close to his face.

Useless. The night was too dark. There were no street lamps in this

district and the moon had not risen. Not that that was unusual; there had

been no sign of the moon now for some years and he often missed its

pale comfort. Those such as himself who had known it in the early days

were beginning to doubt their memories. Even the alchemists and

astrologers refused to mention it any more. To alchemists, the

transmutational moon had always been a vital symbol of the changes

they sought to bring about in both the material world and the realms of

the spirit. Change, Richthausen had been wont to say, simply presaged

the coming of the Great Transformation, Death itself; the moon had to

die like all in creation.

Stojespal dragged his mind from these grim and futile thoughts,

instead turning his attention to workshop and home. Both were not far away, yet they seemed fearfully out of reach to his oddly panicked imagination. If only the King had not summoned him this late in the evening, and for what? To commission a clock! The world's greatest clock, the monarch had announced in a voice that quivered with grandiose ambition. A clock greater than the Prague Orloj, a clock that would redefine not just time but the entire universe, driven by the magic of alchemist's gold. What he had told Stojespal was nonsense, of course — childish stories of divine mechanisms and material transmutation. Even Richthausen would surely give it no credence.

At any rate, Stojespal had little desire to participate in the King's ludicrous plan. It couldn't be done, even if rheumatism wasn't paying havoc with the fine motor skills of his hands. That fact and the King's madness had left the clockmaker with a terrible foreboding. After all, how could a great city prosper with a monarch who was clearly out of his mind? Rudolf's bouts of insanity had been difficult enough — must they go through it again? Was this the explanation for all their woes?

On the edge of his awareness, Stojespal sensed movement.

Thoughts of the King evaporated. He looked around; the darkness was all but impenetrable a mere dozen paces in every direction.

'Is someone there?' he asked nervously.

As his words disappeared into the night, a scraping, clicking noise trailed off on their coat-tails and made his pulses race faster. He forced himself back against the wall in hope of hiding, while he focused hard into the gloom. Wanting to see. Dreading it. Breath caught in his throat.

Click. Scrape. Click. Click-click. Scrape. CLICK-CLICK-CLICK-CLICK…

He gasped as the shadows solidified. They became a large indefinite shape that accelerated towards him with a speed that belied its apparent weight. It gave an impression of hardness but churned as it scuttled through the gloom, as though its solidity was an illusion.

‘Nockrauler!’ Stojespal shrieked.

He thrust against the wall to give himself impetus, turned and ran.

Pain cracked his right knee. He stumbled. The clicking was close now and though he wanted to escape it his body just wouldn’t move. Terror rushed from the core of fear that had long dwelt in his heart, expanding into every part of his body, paralysing him.

He barely noticed as a thin, twisting spike entered his brain through the back of his skull.

Nor did he hear the grinding clangour that drifted from further down the street during his last few seconds of consciousness.

‘You said 4240, right? Earth time?’

Peri stood close outside the open door, staring as far along a bleak,

ancient street as the light spilling from the TARDIS's interior allowed.

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'Of course, Earth time,' came the Doctor's voice from behind her.

'Prague is on Earth after all. Has been for millennia. Really, Peri, you've

got to resist the urge to ask stupid —'

His sudden silence as he exited the TARDIS made Peri smile.

'See?' she said. 'Looks pretty much the same as the last time I was

here.

Surely Prague didn't stay medieval for two and a half thousand years.

I was expecting more futuristic glitz.'

'Strange.' The Doctor scowled. 'Can't be later than 1689.' He pointed

to a row of buildings. 'That whole block was burnt to the ground in the

Great Fire at that time. And rebuilt. I was there.' He huffed and looked at

her in a schoolmasterly fashion. 'Strictly speaking, of course, the city's

not medieval, Peri —'

'You put in the wrong coordinates, didn't you?'

He rushed back into the TARDIS. A moment later Peri heard him

mutter then kick at the TARDIS's console. Silence. He reappeared next

to her. 'Forty-two-forty, Earth time. Prague. At least that's what the old

girl says.' He stared at the place as though it was deliberately provoking

him. ‘So the city hasn’t changed much through all those years?’

‘It’s seventeenth-century Prague. It had changed a lot by 4240.’

‘Maybe we landed in an historic park.’

He frowned. ‘Look at the sky.’

Dutifully Peri glanced up. The city’s lack of lights made the stars

bright. ‘Stars. So?’

‘Good grief, Peri. Don’t you ever *see* what you’re looking at?’ He

folded his arms. ‘Even after a few thousand years of celestial movement,

the constellations couldn’t have changed that much. No sign of the Milky

Way up there. Whenever this Prague is, it’s nowhere near Earth.’

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

He grinned. ‘Oh, it will inevitably make sense, my girl. Everything

makes sense in the end.’

Peri was about to refute his claim by tossing a few choice examples

of Time Lord nonsense at him when movement in her peripheral vision

distracted her. ‘What was that?’

‘What was what?’

She pointed along the street. ‘There’s something down there.’

A large shape shifted at the far end of the tunnel of light that stretched

from where they stood and on into darkness. To Peri the shape was

barely distinguishable from the buildings and the vast black background.

But the Doctor growled urgently, ‘Someone’s in trouble!’

He took off at a run. ‘Get a torch!’ he yelled.

By the time she’d fetched it, the Doctor had reached the spot where they’d seen the shape. It was gone now, but the shaking beam from the torch in Peri’s hand revealed a slumped human body. The Doctor crouched over it.

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‘Is he okay?’ Peri asked. ‘What happened?’

‘Move the light here!’

The old man’s face was gaunt, his beard short and neatly cut. His clothes were of the period — or so Peri assumed. They weren’t futuristic or modern, at any rate.

‘It’s Slobeslav Stojespal,’ said the Doctor. ‘Curiouser and curiouser.’

‘You know him?’

‘He’s why I decided to come to Prague. Or at least his descendants are.’ He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the broken watch Peri had trodden on while scaling a wall on the planet Necros. ‘Stojespal is a great clockmaker — perhaps the greatest ever — and his family continues the tradition through three thousand years or so of Earth history. Their workshops in Prague in the forty-third century can do astonishing things with time pieces!’ He shook his head and sighed wistfully. ‘I thought if I was going to undo the damage caused by your carelessness, I might as well get it done *right*.’

‘ *My* carelessness?’

‘At least he’s alive. In a state of shock, that’s all.’ He indicated a mark on the back of the man’s head. ‘A puncture wound. Hmm. It’s healing up very quickly.’ Suddenly he slapped the old man’s face.

‘Don’t!’ Peri grabbed the Doctor’s arm just as Stojespal’s eyes sprang open. There was no fear or shock or pain in them — just blank incomprehension.

‘Who are you?’ he said.

The Doctor grinned. ‘Slobby, it’s the Doctor. Remember?’

‘You’re not my physician.’

The Doctor grabbed Peri’s torch and turned it on himself. ‘The Doctor, Slobeslav. We met at King Rudolf’s funeral.’

‘I’ve never seen you before. You look like a clown.’

The Doctor grunted. ‘Right, of course. I was different then.’ He thrust the torch back at Peri. ‘It doesn’t matter. We were passing by and saw you were in trouble. Something attacked you.’

The man glanced around with sudden urgency, remembering. ‘The Nockrauler!’ he cried, pushing himself up. ‘We’d better get off the streets at once. It might come back.’

‘Nockrauler?’ Peri squinted into the dark, sure she could see this Nockrauler — whatever it was — all around them.

The old man wasn’t interested in explanations. Hobbling, he urged them to follow along the quiet streets, alternately muttering to himself

and yelling at them to hurry.

‘Notice anything odd?’ muttered the Doctor as they strode along in his wake.

Peri gave him a curious frown.

‘The stink!’ he declared.

Peri wrinkled up her nose, testing the air.

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The Doctor indicated the darkness on their left. ‘It’s the Vltava River.’

‘Without a moon there’d be no tides.’ She regaled him with a self-satisfied smirk. ‘So I guess it’s gone stagnant.’

‘Perhaps,’ said the Doctor. ‘But why would it smell like week-old black pudding?’

* * *

As much as she found the old man’s workshop fascinating, Peri felt a bit too nervous to want to hang around in it. She glanced from intricate mechanical artefacts to ornate clock faces with restless distraction, knowing there was no hope that the Doctor would suddenly decide it didn’t matter whether or not he worked out what seventeenth-century Prague was doing billions of light years and several millennia from where it was supposed to be. He wasn’t one to ignore such anomalies, even if the consequences of knowing proved to be dire. So she tried to appear calm and strong as she moved around among the rubble of cogs and

springs, one ear tuned to the discussion, her mind conjuring monsters.

'So the moon disappeared, did it?' the Doctor said. 'Thus abolishing tidal fluctuations, I assume.'

The old man frowned. 'No, the tides haven't changed.'

'Is that so?'

'But some claim that the days and nights are inconsistent with past experience. That fact, and changes to the star patterns, have made standard astrological charts useless. They've had to be re-done.'

'Very inconvenient.'

Rubbing a peephole on the dusty glass of a window, Peri peered out into the coming dawn. Prague was certainly a beautiful place, whatever danger was hanging over it. Blood-red morning light spilled across the spires and towers, making the stonework glow. Wonderful!

A dark shadow passed across the window. Peri gasped and pulled back. When she leaned forward again, whatever it had been was gone.

She glanced towards the Doctor. He was looking grumpily thoughtful.

'This is 1689? Hmm. Going back to when everything apparently started gives us 1648. A very interesting year. The year the Thirty Years War ended.'

'The war ended?' Slobeslav ran his fingers through his beard. 'I thought as much. It hasn't been mentioned for so long. We receive little communication from outside now.'

'Really?' The Doctor's raised eyebrow twitched. 'How about Emperor

Ferdinand III? I believe he moved court to Vienna in 1648 —'

'No,' cried the old man emphatically. 'No, sir. *That* was a lie spread by his murderers. There was a coup... it was a very turbulent time. Ferdinand was assassinated in September.'

'By whom?'

Anti-Hapsburg revolutionaries. Another defenestration, I'm sorry to say. As an approach to problem-solving, throwing people out of windows is something of a local tradition.' He grunted.

'I suppose there was no Swedish occupation, then?'

'Certainly not. The city has seceded from the Empire and our King is now Edmund the First.'

'Well, well. That all surprises me, Slobeslav.'

Peri sighed. Politics and history! Even the Time Lord couldn't get his facts straight. She turned back to the window. Ah, there were people out and about now that the sun had fully risen. Everything seemed to be settling into a state of relative normality. Perhaps the Doctor would decide his intervention wasn't needed after all.

'Perpugilliam!' As usual, the Doctor's tone was annoyingly impatient.

'What is it?' she answered.

'I need you to go to the TARDIS. Do you think you can manage that?'

'Are we leaving?' she said, turning towards him hopefully.

'Of course not.' He winked at her. 'No need to go off half-cocked.

There's something I want you to fetch, that's all.'

She didn't make it back to the TARDIS. The river stopped her.

She'd been walking beside it for perhaps five minutes before she noticed how strange it was. At night it had been invisible. In the daylight its churning black water looked decidedly unnatural. It was thick and oily, with an iridescent stillness to its surface that allowed movement only in wide, curved planes. It didn't reflect the sun.

Then she saw that the opposite bank was breaking apart, with archipelagos of city jutting into what otherwise appeared to be the same lightless mass as the river. It was as though areas of city were melting into the oily darkness. These scraps of cityscape radiated outward from those points where bridges crossed the river, as though anchored by them to the main mass of the city on this side of the Vltava.

As far as Peri could tell, however, none of Prague's inhabitants seemed even vaguely aware of the danger. Several carts and assorted pedestrians calmly made their way over the bridge, oblivious to the oddity. Others were coming the opposite way, displaying no great urgency.

Not knowing what it meant or what to do, Peri ran back to Slobeslav's workshop to tell the Doctor.

He and the old clockmaker were bent over a table studying a rat's

nest of papers and open books. The Doctor frowned at her as she blurted out her story.

‘Calm down, Peri,’ he said.

‘Calm down?’ She grabbed his arm. ‘I’m trying to tell you — Prague is sinking into a sea of gloop. The whole place is in danger!’

‘I prefer "ooze" myself. "Gloop" is hardly scientific.’ He frowned at her.

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‘Did you fetch the universal adaptor from the TARDIS?’

‘You don’t understand, Doctor. The city is literally disappearing!’

He stood, grabbed her shoulders and moved her aside, shooting a glance at Slobeslav. ‘I know what’s going on, Peri. I have to work out why it’s happening and do something about it. For that, I’ll need the adaptor.’

‘Surely your friend has something that’d do.’

‘Don’t be absurd.’ He frowned. ‘It would also be useful if you wouldn’t whine so much.’

She pouted. ‘You’re not going to tell me what’s going on, are you?’

He grinned. ‘Let’s just say the city isn’t being consumed by the — um, gloop. It’s growing out of it.’ He made a sarcastic openhanded gesture. ‘Now, will you do what I asked?’

On her way back to the TARDIS, Peri stood for a while and stared at the distant clumps of city beyond the river. So this Prague had been forming from the gloop: a slow, patient expansion? Decades and so little

growth had taken place. According to the Doctor, there was a sort of flexible containment field that maintained the currents and conditions needed for such a small pocket of life to function in the absence of a proper global ecology. But why? Was this idea of Prague gradually coming into being better than her initial impression that the city was being consumed? She supposed so, but somehow it was also creepier. Were actual people popping into existence — spontaneously and fully formed? She shivered and kept walking.

It took her a while to find the Doctor's gadget, eventually stumbling across it amid a pile of tangled electrical components in one of the workrooms. She wondered what it did, because it didn't scream 'universal adaptor' at her, whatever one of those might look like. What it most reminded her of was an oversized penlight that had seen better days. Sometime back, the Doctor had decided to construct it, he'd told her, based on an older gizmo, only this one would be even more useful.

Peri examined it, but it looked neither elegant nor practical.

She took the small ill-made object and headed back. A few pedestrians glared at her, no doubt bemused by the strange blue box she'd emerged from. She smiled at them and hurried away.

'You! Halt!'

The voice was strong and insistent; instantly Peri was convinced she was its target. She glanced around, clutching the universal adaptor like a weapon. A man dressed in a gaudy uniform strode towards her. He

had

the air of a cop, but Peri was reasonably sure Prague wouldn't have had

a police force as such in the seventeenth century.

'Me?' she said.

'Is this thing yours?' the man asked, gesturing at the TARDIS. Bushy eyebrows scrunched over his burning eyes, which were intent on

intimidating her.

'Mine? No.' She shrugged casually. 'I_ um... noticed it myself as I was passing and thought I'd check it out. Odd, isn't it?'

The man scowled. He clearly wasn't buying her story. 'I think you'd better come with me, miss. We've had reports of spies sent from the Empire —'

'Leave me alone!' She held up her clenched fist, from which the universal adaptor protruded threateningly.

The guard snarled and grabbed at her arm.

Peri had been accosted, chased, captured, abused and frightened far too often since meeting the Doctor to just go along with this bully. She started back from the man's grasp and then, once on the move, broke into a run. The man yelled and lumbered after her. His size was to her advantage; Peri found that she was much faster than he was. Hopefully

she could lose him before she got to the clockmaker's place. She glanced back and noted with some satisfaction that he was falling

behind.

‘Watch out!’ a voice yelled in her ear as she slammed into someone on the pavement. She felt her feet tangle and, while dealing with the surprise, lost her balance completely. She reached for the metal railing that ran along the river’s edge, couldn’t find it, and realised there was a gap in the fencing. A series of stone stairs led down to a small jetty, but momentum carried her straight over them into open space. She found herself tumbling headlong towards the surface of the river.

The last thing she heard was the guard’s hard roar bellowing after her as she disappeared beneath the black surface of the ooze.

Gasping for breath. Thrashing with arms and legs to get back to the surface before the waters consume her. In her panic, she’s unable to make any headway. Yet as the minutes pass and she tumbles deeper she has no trouble breathing, feels no dying ecstasy, sees no vision of her strange, Doctor-transformed life flashing before her eyes. Despite the slithery sensation of black ooze trickling mucus-like down her throat, despite the oily coldness surging through her lungs and stomach, she breathes on. The ooze seems to cradle her, feeding her oxygen while it infuses her entire body. Her eyes spring open.

She sees nothing except darkness at first. The smell — the Doctor was right, it *does* smell like black pudding — is so liquid and all-pervasive that it seeps into every pore. Her thinking becomes fuzzy.

Suddenly she can't remember her name or what she was doing before

—

Before what? Was there a *before*? Had she always been here?

'Now, will you do what I asked?'

She floats. Around her, she catches glimpses of light trails that spark into glum existence and disappear again. Shapes that exist only in the

corner of her eye. They churn and threaten and soothe. A voice whispers.

A familiar voice.

'Change, my girl, is essential to the life of the universe. Some of us have made an art of it, that's all!'

'Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans. I've been inconvenienced by every malignant lifeform this side of Armageddon. But you're the5rst to break my watch!'

'Keep breathing, Peri. That's how it works. Keep breathing — and use your head.'

The light trails burrow into her skin, pierce her eyeballs, echo so loudly in her ears the familiar voice is drowned out.

They explode around and within her.

They take her to a place where her only hope is to be lost forever.

* * *

According to Slobeslav's amazingly synchronised clocks, it was past

midday when the Doctor realised Peri hadn't returned. He'd already muttered a few insults about useless assistants when a niggle of real worry drove the clichés from his mind. The old watchmaker had grown tired of being interrogated and was asleep on a bed at the back of the workshop. But what the Doctor had learnt from him — and what he had deduced from it — had been enough to keep the Time Lord pre-occupied ever since: tinkering with Slobeslav's tools, doing what he did best, in fact — improvising.

He knew now that he had to speak with the king of this strange fragment of Bohemia: Edmund the First, who wanted to build a Great Clock with a heart of gold. That idea worried the Doctor quite a bit, though he wasn't sure what he could do about it. There were a few pieces missing, that was all — one historical artefact and the adaptor he'd sent Peri to fetch.

Concerned for her, he rushed from the workshop and towards the spot where they'd materialised the night before. There was no sign of Peri anywhere. When he reached the TARDIS, he discovered a group of workmen struggling unsuccessfully to shift the heavy blue police box, overseen by one of the King's guardsmen.

'May I ask what you think you're doing?' he said, approaching the man. The soldier eyed him coldly. 'What business is it of yours?'

'For a start,' the Doctor barked right back at him, 'that box belongs to

me and you have no right to move it.'

'It's yours?' The man stiffened. 'What's in it?'

'More than you can possibly imagine.'

'In that case, you can come and enlighten me at my leisure!' The soldier leered at the Doctor.

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'On what grounds?'

'Suspicion of espionage. And don't try running off like the other one.' Rather than retreating, the Doctor came closer. 'Other one? What other one? A young woman?' The Doctor's sudden, fiercely looming proximity put the soldier off-kilter.

'Yes, but you can't—'

'Where is she?' the Doctor ordered, index finger threatening the man's composure. When the soldier hesitated, the Time Lord's voice became even more authoritative. 'Well? I haven't got all day. A woman's life may be at stake!'

The man looked around for potential backup. 'She fell in the river.'

'You pulled her out again, I trust.'

'I — no.' He scowled and added defensively, 'The Vltava is treacherous. I couldn't —'

'Show me!'

'You can't speak to an officer of the Guard like that!'

If the Doctor's demeanour had been daunting before, it suddenly

became menacing. He reached out and gripped the man's shoulder. 'It's

how I speak to all fools. Show me the spot! Now!'

The soldier forgot to be indignant. Blurting out an endless catalogue

of excuses, he took the Doctor to the jetty where Peri had fallen into the

river. The black ooze was thick and opaque, unrelentingly miserly with its

secrets. The Doctor noticed that there were no boats plying the river —

and none moored at any of the nearby jetties.

He asked about it.

The soldier shrugged. 'The Nockrauler frightens them.' He shrugged.

'A local bogeyman.'

A deep stab of anxiety shook the Time Lord's self-confidence to the

core. Yet what he knew of the ooze gave him hope that Peri hadn't

simply drowned. The alternatives, however, gave him less cause for

optimism. There was only one thing for him to do now. 'I need to see the

King,' he declared.

Peri snapped into unfocused awareness as a voice that sounded

achingly familiar whispered in her ear. The voice had mentioned the

King, but it wasn't the King she wanted to see. Desperately she pushed

herself up from the river bottom, seeking the surface, and it was with a

sense of gratification that she felt herself moving. Upward.

At first it was slow and awkward, as though something was holding

her back. Gradually, however, the sensation passed. As she tired, she

relaxed, almost gave up the struggle; the feeling of recalcitrance diffused

through her limbs and faded. She was moving with purpose then, finally

breaking the surface of the river and climbing up the stony wall onto the

walkway. It was late afternoon and the light was beginning to fade across

Prague. Nevertheless there were plenty of people to witness her

emergence from the black water. On the edge of her consciousness, Peri

saw them shriek and start away from her. Confusion spread, turning into

a frenzied stampede once the general panic reached flashpoint. But any

puzzlement Peri felt at this reaction was momentary; she ignored it and

headed towards the clockmaker's workshop. That is where she wanted

to go. That was where he would be. Waiting for her. She couldn't quite

remember who he was, but thought of him comforted her and filled her

with reassurance.

The clockmaker's house was quiet. Peri pushed in through the front

door and drifted clumsily towards the workroom, peripherally aware of

ornaments falling to the floor and furniture being smashed and

knocked

over. Yet she was unable to relate the confusion to herself. The

clockmaker leaned over a bench, so absorbed he hadn't heard her entry.

Now he looked up. Shock propelled him into an awkward stumble.

'No!' he croaked.

Peri tried to speak, to remind him of who she was, but she still had no

recollection of her name and the only sounds she could produce were

garbled.

Please, leave me alone,' the clockmaker pleaded.

Peri reached out to comfort him. Though the black, semi-metallic

tentacles that appeared in her field of vision weren't remotely human,

she thought little of the contradiction. She moved closer. The clockmaker

screeched, pulled over a table to form a barrier and fled from her. She

smashed through the wood with ease and in a moment grabbed him.

'It's okay,' she said. 'I'm looking for the other one.'

If the clockmaker understood her, he had no intention of cooperating.

He squirmed and punched. She felt nothing.

'Stop that!' Harsh, malformed sounds rang through the confined

space. 'What do you want?' the old man moaned.

'I want the other.'

Holding the clockmaker tightly, she glanced around to make sure he

wasn't hiding from her. He was a trickster, she recalled, and could be

erratic in his behaviour.

Though there was no sign of him, she did spy a note in a scrawled but familiar handwriting. It lay on the bench where the clockmaker had been working. ‘Ich bin gegangen, Peri zu suchen.’ She shook her head as the words blurred and slipped into a different form in her mind. ‘Treffen Sie mich… Meet me… am Schloß… at the castle. I must speak with the King.’

‘The castle?’ she queried the clockmaker. ‘He’s there?’

All the man did was whimper some more.

King Edmund had a chameleon-like ability to go bright red when he was frustrated. The Doctor found it irritating at best.

‘You’re king of what?’ the Time Lord growled. ‘A Bohemia that

consists of half of Prague and a whole ocean of synthetic sludge! Not much to make your mother proud, is it?’

In retrospect, his lack of discretion would strike the Doctor as less than conducive to good diplomacy. But he couldn’t help himself. Regal stupidity was one of the most annoying principles of the universe and the Doctor felt it his duty to rail against it at every chance.

‘You exhaust my goodwill, Doctor.’

The Time Lord swallowed back an even less discreet retort.

Edmund had kept him waiting for several hours before granting an audience, despite the Time Lord’s insistence that it was a matter of

some

urgency. For a while, the Doctor's waiting-room rants got him nowhere,

as though Edmund was determined to deliver a lesson in humility.

Needless to say, it didn't work. Threats of blackmail finally got the Doctor

in. He'd recalled some scurrilous gossip about the Raylesteins, in the

light of whose dubious royal connections Edmund had apparently argued

his legitimacy as king.

'Your Majesty,' he said with an air of restrained impatience, 'sooner or

later the gestalt AI's technomorphic puppet is going to realise that I'm

onto it and it will come looking for me —'

'Technomorphic puppet? What garble is this? Are you saying a

foreign assassin is in our midst?'

The Doctor sighed. He'd started out explaining that this planet was

one big ball of abiogenetic pseudo-urschleim — an ocean of simulated

primordial soup. Who created it? He had no idea. But it was clearly the

product of a highly advanced civilisation, one that had sunk under the

usual weight of self-destruction, perhaps, and had devolved into nano-

sludge. The pseudo-urschleim had been programmed by its creators to

survive, to re-evolve, and to do so it had grabbed at the first scrap of

higher-level bio-patterning it came across — which had happened to

originate, via a serendipitous time-space rift, from Prague of 15 January

1648. Or so the Doctor had deduced, a suitably curious and

anomalous

event having taken place on that date in this very castle. That's what had

given him the clue. In effect the pseudo-urschleim had picked up a

quantum-level structural snapshot of Prague, assimilated it into its data

matrix and begun a slow replication process. The primordial ocean had

been taking form ever since then, shaped by the dynamics of that

moment in time.

Edmund, of course, hadn't understood a word of it.

'Yes, very well,' the Doctor said. 'In your terms, it's not an assassin,

but a sort of golem. You know what a golem is, right?'

Edmund's face became intently concerned. 'An artificial man?'

'But this one is not so much a man as a dark scuttling creature, a sort

of super-enhanced cockroach — straight from the population's shared

subconscious. They call it "Nockrauler".'

Edmund probably intended to speak, but the Doctor had no desire to

hear more of his ignorant bravado right at that moment.

'This golem is controlled by an intelligence that resides in the black

waters — a spirit, if you'd prefer. This spirit reprograms you — turns you

all to its will as needed — at night through the services of the golem.'

'And what does it want?'

'To develop into a total living ecosystem, I'd guess. Let's say it stole a

part of Prague and transported it across the universe to this place.' He waved his arm widely. 'This isn't Earth. That's why the moon isn't around any more. That's why you know nothing about what's been happening elsewhere. The original Edmund exists a long way from here. Meanwhile the spirit re-forms the world around you, keeping tidal currents and atmospheric variations relatively normal within a slowly expanding energy field.'

'Re-forms the world, you say?'

'It's the spirit that wants your Great Clock built, Edmund.'

'My clock?'

The Doctor gritted his teeth. He hated it when those with a duty to learn from what he was saying simply parroted his words back at him. 'If you build it, it will allow the spirit to reopen the fracture in time and space that brought you into existence in the first place. It will be prepared for it this time and goodness knows what it will do —'

'Do you know what I think, Doctor?' The King stood for the first time and waddled towards the Time Lord. 'I think these are the ravings of a madman. We can all see that the world is where it ever was, even if the moon has gone. As for the Nockrauler — I don't believe in it.' He squinted at the Time Lord, evaluating. 'What's your true purpose here? What do you want?'

The Doctor leaned closer until he and the King were eye to bloodshot eye. ‘I need the gold,’ he said. ‘Richthausen’s gold!’

‘Ha!’ Edmund drew back into a haughty leer. ‘As I thought — a thief as well as a spy. Guards! Take him from me! He will be tried for sedition.’

A pair of armoured gorillas approached the Doctor, who decided then and there to take a more conciliatory approach. ‘Your Majesty, I regret my insolence. Please, I don’t want the gold for myself. When Emperor Ferdinand had the alchemist Richthausen create gold in his presence on that day in 1648, he caused a ripple in time and space that the spirit here caught a trace of and used to —’

‘Enough! I won’t hear another word!’

Something crashed loudly in the room beyond the audience hall.

They paused to listen. Distant voices were screaming.

‘What’s going on out there?’ the King roared. He pointed to one of the Guards. ‘You! Go and check.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I wouldn’t, your Majesty. I think the Al — the dark spirit — has cottoned on to what I’m up to.’

More thuds and crashes and sounds of panic echoed in from beyond

the hall.

‘So what’s out there?’ the King asked, jowls quivering nervously. ‘The Nockrauler, of course.’

‘Absurd!’

Being the man he was, the Doctor was well aware of just how often the absurd manifested itself once it was evoked. Sure enough, this time was no exception; the heavy wood-and-metal door suddenly bulged inward, tore from its hinges and crashed to the floor, taking out a couple of guardsmen in the process. Through the ruins strode the Nockrauler.

Seen in the audience chamber’s artificial light, it took even the Doctor’s breath away. It was the size of a tank — a gigantic *faux* cockroach with a variable number of crab-like legs, many of them more like the tentacles of a cephalopod, and a black surface that shifted and pulsed in continual metamorphic adjustment. But that was not what shocked him; he’d seen uglier and much scarier creatures. What chilled the Doctor to the bone and caused both his hearts to miss a beat was the fact that suspended in the middle of the creature, woven into its musculature by a thousand needle-like veins that skewered every part of her body, was a woman. Her face stared straight ahead, wide-eyed and intent, and was clearly providing the AI’s golem with vision and guidance stolen from her memories.

‘Peri!’ the Doctor whispered.

The Nockrauler heard his voice and scurried towards him, knocking the guards aside like flies. Shrieking, the King sought asylum behind

his

royal seat. Only the Doctor held his ground.

‘I’ve been looking for you, Doctor.’

‘What’s it done to you, Peri?’ he said.

‘It? What do you mean?’

The Doctor stared into Peri’s eyes and though they weren’t entirely

zombie-like he could see in them less of Peri and more of some vast

subhuman consciousness. He tried not to imagine what it must feel like.

‘Let her go!’ he ordered.

Peri’s voice hardened. ‘Can’t let her go. Won’t.’

‘You’ll regret it.’

‘Don’t have regrets. Take necessary action.’

‘Well, none of this is necessary.’

‘All is necessary.’

‘No!’ The Doctor stared fiercely into Peri’s glazed eyes. ‘You can’t use

people in this way. Work with them. Help them develop a world that suits

you both. Not one based on the fears and paranoias and miseries of the

past. As their creator, you have a duty.’

‘You are an interferer,’ it replied tangentially. ‘Have seen it in this

one’s mind.’

‘What’s your Great Clock idea supposed to achieve, if not

interference?’

Will return me to the original of this place. Can widen and deepen the

template. Shall take that world apart. Absorb it, study it for reproduction.'

'Well, that's the thing, you see?' The Doctor shrugged in mock

helplessness. 'I can't let you.'

Right now, though, he didn't have the wherewithal to stop it and

hence was rather hopeful that it wouldn't take him up on his threat. For a

start, he needed his bodged-together universal adaptor, which he could

see Peri had clutched in her right hand. But even if he could extract it

from the Nockrauler, he'd still require the gold that Richthausen had

reportedly made for Emperor Ferdinand if he intended to achieve

anything useful. He doubted his adaptor could interface with the AT by

itself; the interspatial anomaly that was the alchemist's gold was his only

hope of forging a connection. And even that hope was based on

guesswork.

But it was all he had.

'Must destroy you,' the Nockrauler declared.

As he heard the words, the Time Lord became aware of two important

factors. Firstly, a look of anxiety and struggle flittered across Peri's

features, telling him that her consciousness was closer to the surface

than he'd thought. And secondly, he saw a long black protuberance like

a spear heading straight for his chest.

He leapt aside with a balletic flourish that ended when he made awkward contact with the floor. The Nockrauler's limb slammed into the wood mere inches from his head. The Doctor rolled, scrambled to his feet and jumped for cover. This time the black limb scratched across his neck as he went.

He landed on something soft but vociferous. Edmund swore at him and tried to push him away. 'Don't lead it here! Get away from me!'

The Doctor slammed him hard against the wall. 'Just shut up and listen, Edmund! I need Richthausen's gold and I need it now. It's the only way to stop this thing.'

He shoved Edmund left towards the other side of the Royal Seat just as the Nockrauler gouged at the space where they'd been.

'Where's the medallion!' the Doctor cried, a hair's breadth from Edmund's bright-red face.

'All right! All right!'

The King reached into his coat and produced a shiny golden medal attached to a chain about his neck. 'I keep it with me always — the means by which I shall ascend to the Imperial throne —'

'No speeches, thank you!' The Doctor tore the medal from its chain, once again ducked out from the Nockrauler's grasp and sprinted towards the centre of the hall. As he went he fumbled in his pocket for the cube-

shaped power-grid analogue he'd constructed from wire and metal

scraps in Slobeslav Stojespal's workshop. He pushed the medallion into

the heart of it and thrust the whole thing at the Nockrauler's 'face'.

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'What have you done?' the thing said through Peri's lips.

'Built a constrainer,' he lied, infusing his words with as much

improvised conviction as he could muster. 'Try to retrieve the gold

without knowing the design code and its power will be nullified forever.'

The Nockrauler shuffled back a step or two.

'Give it to us!'

'You can have it in a minute.' The Doctor stared into Peri's eyes.

Perpugilliam,' he said in a stern tone, 'you've played around with this

Kafkaesque monstrosity for long enough. Can we get back to business?'

'Release the gold!'

'Peri, I need you to concentrate.' He leaned in very close. 'Keep

breathing. That's how it works. Keep breathing — and use your head.'

'Doctor?'

'That's the way. Fight it off". I need my universal adaptor, Peri. Do you

think you can manage to give it to me? Now!'

'Doctor, I — She cannot do this.'

'Sure she can. Peri! The adaptor please!' He held out his hand.

'No!'

‘Yes!’

Peri’s hand twitched. Strain showed on her face, but her eyes were alive with determination. She was strong; the Doctor knew that, otherwise she could not have survived being with him even for the short time she had been his companion.

‘Come on, my girl! That’s the way.’

Her hand broke through the translucent surface of the Nockrauler. The Doctor snatched the universal adaptor from her fingers. ‘Thank you!’ he said.

He rammed the device into the space he’d made for it in his analogue cube. He felt it sizzle. Then he held the whole contraption out to the Nockrauler.

‘Now you can have it!’ he declared. He flicked on the universal adaptor’s power button and twisted the control ratchet to full. The resulting negative energy pulse deconstructed the Nockrauler in an instant.

Later, once the mess had been cleaned up a bit, Peri leaned on the Doctor as they stood at the doorway of the TARDIS, on the verge of escaping this fabricated world. She felt exhausted and ill-used, if not in actual pain. The numerous puncture wounds in her flesh were already healing, though the holes in her clothes were terminal, she feared.

Slobeslav Stojespal held out his hand and the Doctor shook it. ‘Thank you, Doctor. You too, Miss Peri. You freed us from a great evil.’

‘You’ve got the more difficult task, Slobeslav.’ The Doctor gestured towards the vast black waters. ‘I turned off the Al’s higher functions, effectively removing its independence. Prague will grow, but now you

can create the world for yourselves. It doesn’t have to be like the one you originally came from. In fact, it can’t be. But it can be better.’

Slobeslav sighed then held up the cube that contained both Richthausen’s gold and the Doctor’s universal adaptor. ‘You’ll want this back. I studied it, but its mechanisms are beyond me.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No, keep it; the gold will help you if you follow the instructions I left. But the adaptor is burned out and useless, I’m afraid. It has serious design flaws.’

The clockmaker nodded. ‘Goodbye, then.’ He glanced suspiciously at the TARDIS. ‘This blue box is a vehicle, you say?’

‘That’s right. Goodbye, Slobeslav. Perhaps we’ll meet another time, another place.’

The old man waved. The Doctor supported Peri as they went into the TARDIS and shut the door.

‘I thought alchemy was just a crackpot system of philosophies, Doctor.’

Peri settled herself into a chair. ‘But that gold was the product of magic.’

The Time Lord grunted. ‘Not magic. My guess is that the grain of red powder that Richthausen used to create the gold was some sort of cosmic fragment, possibly retrieved from a meteorite. Whatever procedure he used on it activated a sort of quantum disruption that split right through the space-time continuum.’ He laughed. ‘Okay, perhaps it’s hokum. But scientific hokum.’

‘So why did the TARDIS bring us here, when you’d set the coordinates for Prague, 4240?’

Ali!’ The Doctor began fiddling with dials on the control console. ‘The old girl knows where I need to go, even if I don’t. Anyway, she *did* bring us to Prague in the year 4240, didn’t she? She just added some details of her own to the destination coordinates.’

Peri sighed. ‘Sometimes I think everything you say is hokum.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Whatever works,’ he said, and yanked the lever that sent the TARDIS on its way.

The Dogs of War

Brian Keene

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Leela and K-9

The city was feral — a blasted landscape of dirt and rubble. Time had not been kind to Prague. The city's beauty, which had seduced the Nazis and other invaders, was gone. There was nothing left to soothe the savage beasts prowling the wastelands.

Clouds obscured the moon, plunging the ruins into darkness.

Something howled. The cry was answered by others. There were other sounds too — menacing growls, long nails on stone, padded feet on dirt, panting.

A teen tumbled down a debris-covered slope, coming to rest in a pool of stagnant, oily water. He was naked. The stones had slashed his skin during the fall. Grunting with pain, he stumbled to his feet, quickly examining himself. Both his knees were bloody. There were cuts on his elbows and shins. Crouching, the boy glanced back the way he'd come.

Three shadowed figures appeared at the top of the hill, one shorter than the others. They sniffed the air, and then spotted him.

'Come here, boy,' the shortest figure said softly. 'We're not going to

hurt you.'

A second figure inched down the slope, holding a length of rope.

'Stay back,' the frightened youth warned the shadows.

The three pursuers laughed.

'Easy, Spike,' the third figure whispered. 'Don't spook him or he might attack. You don't want him biting you. No telling what diseases he's carrying — could have rabies.'

'He's scared,' the short one said. 'He wouldn't really attack, would he, Father? He's just a pup.'

'Pup or not, he's still wild. Not tame, like the humans you've grown up with. He's never been domesticated. Has no fear of Canines.'

The figure with the rope, Spike, drew closer to the cowering boy. 'I'll teach him fear, Bruiser.'

'Stay back,' the teen warned again.

Spike swung the lasso at the boy. The youth dodged the toss and fled around the pool. Grumbling, Spike reeled in the lasso and ran to the bottom of the hill.

'Come,' he hollered. 'He's getting away.'

'Let's go, son,' Bruiser said. 'We're near the spot where they caught the two strange humans yesterday. We're forbidden to go into that area.

Can't let the human reach it.'

His son nodded. 'Thank you again for taking me hunting.'

‘I was your age when your grandfather took Spike and me hunting for the first time. He learned from his father — your great-grandfather, one of the first hunters. One day, you’ll teach your own son, just as we’ve taught you. Now hurry.’

At the bottom of the hill, they sniffed the air, picking up their prey’s scent. With a howl, they dropped to all fours and continued the hunt. The moon emerged from behind the clouds. Pale light shone on the three German Shepherds as they gave chase.

The Doctor waved the tip of his scarf through the bars of the cage. ‘Excuse me,’ he called. ‘I don’t suppose you would fancy a game of chess?’

The guard — a Rottweiler armed with a rawhide whip and a stone-tipped spear — growled at him.

‘No, then?’ the Doctor asked.

The guard jabbed the spear through the bars. ‘Shut up. There’s no talking allowed.’

Leela sprang forward, grasping at the spear, but the guard yanked it free. He laughed. Leela bared her teeth and snarled.

‘You’re a ferocious one,’ the guard chuckled. ‘You’ll be good for the pit fights, if the Alpha has no further plans for you.’

‘Who is this Alpha?’ The Doctor kept his voice cordial and friendly. ‘Is he in charge?’

‘The Alpha Male is always in charge. That’s why Canines are superior

to humans. You have no leaders in your packs.'

'Fascinating,' the Doctor murmured, dismissing the guard with a wave of his hand. He sat down in the middle of the cage. Crossing his legs, he twirled his floppy, wide-brimmed hat on his index finger. After a moment, he noticed that Leela was glaring at him.

'What's troubling you?' He put the hat back on his head.

Leela blinked, stunned by the question. 'Where are we, Doctor?'

'We're in a cage.'

'I know that,' she snapped. 'But *where*? You said we were going to a place called Prague, so that you could teach me about this chess.'

'Oh, we're in Prague. Or what's left of it. I'd guess the year is about 2406. Just a small steering error, there's no reason for alarm.'

'No reason for alarm?' Leela shook her head. 'We are being held prisoner!'

'Only because you stabbed that Dobermann Pinscher when we encountered him. I've told you dozens of times not to attack everyone we meet. You and those Janis thorns...'

'I stabbed him because he was attacking you.'

'Indeed.' The Doctor nodded. 'He was just doing what his breed is supposed to do — guard things. I'm sure it was all just a misunderstanding. If you hadn't stabbed him, we'd have sorted it out.'

Leela's temper flared. 'If I had not stabbed him, you would be dead.'

'Well, yes...' The Doctor paused, considering. 'There is that.'

Leela sat down beside him, despondent. 'I wish I still had my knife.'

Their Canine captors had taken all of their belongings: Leela's knife and Janis thorns, and everything from the Doctor's many pockets, including his sonic screwdriver and a small paper bag full of jelly babies.

They were being held inside the ruins of a kennel. Many of the other cages also contained humans, but they were very different from the Doctor and Leela. The other captives were naked and unkempt. They stared at Leela's animal skins and the Doctor's scarf and coat with disbelief. They seemed savage. Even more savage than Leela, who had been a warrior of the primitive Sevateem tribe — descendants of a shipwrecked survey team from Earth. While Leela still retained her ferocity, she was also highly intelligent and able to adapt quickly. Their fellow prisoners seemed to be the exact opposite, regressing further into savagery.

Leela sighed. 'You said that you wished to civilise me, to teach me about what my ancestors did for fun on Earth, including this chess. These other humans do not seem very advanced to me.'

'They were once,' the Doctor said. 'As Europe changed, so did Prague. Interaction with the West helped the city shed its past. It no longer clung to old superstitions. Prague's progressive leaders reinvented the city by relaxing the restraints other countries enforced

on

the scientific community. Corporations set up shop here, safe from

governmental interference, as long as they contributed to the economy.'

Leela frowned in confusion. 'You are speaking like a Tesh again,

Doctor.'

'Thank you.'

'I did not mean that as a compliment. What does all of this have to do

with our captors?'

'One of the companies that moved to Prague was a biogenic research

group called the Globe Corporation. They developed the Dogs of War: a

highly intelligent breed of canine used in law enforcement and sold to

wealthy nations as a valuable addition to their arsenal. They were

amazing, really. They could walk on two legs if needed, and had

opposable thumbs. They used weapons and tools.'

Leela motioned towards the guard. 'And he is one of these dogs?'

'Yes,' the Doctor said, 'a descendant of them. They've continued to

evolve.'

She pointed at the other imprisoned humans. 'And they are my

ancestors?'

'Indeed,' the Doctor said. 'It appears that humanity has gone to the

dogs.'

Leela frowned. 'How do you intend to free us?'

'I don't. I intend to take a nap.'

He lay back and pulled the hat over his face.

‘But, Doctor,’ Leela nearly shouted. ‘How will we escape?’

‘Keep your voice down. We’ll escape in good time.’

‘How?’

‘You forget that we have a dog of our own.’

The youth ran on. His pulse pounded. His mouth was dry. Heavy calluses protected the bottoms of his feet from the sharp rocks, but his other cuts still bled, leaving a trail for his pursuers. He heard them behind him. Overcome with the excitement of the hunt, they’d given up speech and reverted to yips and barks.

He ducked behind a rusted hulk of metal — his grandfather claimed humans had built metal things called machines, but his grandfather was senile. The boy dropped to his hands and knees and crawled through a muddy trench. He winced as gravel dug into his wounds.

The sounds of pursuit faded. The boy peeked over the edge of the trench, carefully scanning the horizon. There was no sign of the dogs. It was as if they’d suddenly given up the hunt, refusing to go any further.

The youth crawled from the trench, covered in mud and blood. He limped across a cratered field. Something caught his attention. A blue, rectangular box, taller than a full-grown man. Written on the side in the

language of the Ancients was a single word: POLICE. The boy did not know what 'POLICE' was, but he knew about the Ancients. They'd lived here once, long ago. His grandfather said they were human, but his grandfather said many silly things.

Curious, he approached the box. A door opened and a bright light illuminated the field. He caught a quick glimpse inside the box. It seemed bigger inside than out. The boy drew back. This was obviously magic. He held his breath, afraid. A shiny, silver thing, shaped roughly like a dog and constructed entirely of metal, emerged from the box. Its ears turned back and forth, as if listening for something. The door closed behind it.

The boy wanted to run away but his legs felt weak and rubbery. He thought he might pass out. His ears rang. The metal dog coasted towards him. It had no legs, at least none that he could see. It halted a few feet from him, its eyes glowing red. Then the creature spoke.

'Greetings. I am K-9.'

The boy stuttered. 'C-canine?'

'Affirmative. I am K-9.'

'W-where d-did you... come from?'

'The TARDIS. Please identify yourself.'

'Me?'

'Affirmative.'

'My... my name is Ben Gay-ul, son of Day-vid Kit-sun. Your pack was

hunting me.’

‘Negative. I do not have a pack. The Doctor is my master. Leela is my

mistress.’

Forgetting his fear, Ben grew excited. ‘Did you say Dock-tor? You

serve him?’

‘Affirmative. I was built by Professor Marius of the Bi-Al Foundation in

the year 5000. I was sent to travel with the Doctor and Leela.’

Ben shook his head. ‘I don’t understand you. Does the Dock-tor serve

the Canines?’

‘Negative. I serve him. State the reason for your query.’

‘I came here because we heard rumours that the Canines had

captured two humans who were not of any other tribe. One was called

Dock-tor.’

‘Affirmative. Why do you seek them?’

‘Because...’ Ben sighed. ‘I don’t like the Canines. They hunt us. Use

us for their entertainment, gambling on human races and fights. They

make us detect traps when they battle other packs. They even use us to

hunt other humans. We are nothing but slaves to them. Pets. The elders

of my tribe say that it has always been this way. Everyone agrees,

except for my grandfather, and he is insane. But I do not think we should

live this way. If we united the other tribes, we could stand up to the

Canines and fight back. I hoped this Dock-tor would help me do that.'

'Where is the Doctor's location? My sensors do not detect his presence.'

'I know where they've taken him. Many of my people are held there. If I show you, can you help me free them?'

'Affirmative. I am equipped with an extensive database and sophisticated sensors.'

'Are any of those things weapons?'

'Negative. I am also equipped with a laser.'

'If that is a weapon, it will come in handy. I lost my club.'

'It can be used as a weapon.'

'Come,' Ben said. 'Let us find my tribe. You can speak to the elders. Convince them that it is time we fought back.'

The Alpha Male, a massive pit bull, snarled in contempt.

'I trust you enjoyed your visit from the Inquisitor?'

'Oh, quite,' the Doctor said. 'We had a lovely chat.'

'Chat? I ordered him to torture you!'

'Well, yes. I believe Leela should like to talk to you about that. Perhaps you could open the cage?'

Leela's growl matched the Alpha Male's.

The Alpha Male turned to the guard. 'Order a full detail. The female is to be consigned to the pit fights. The male can be handed over to the science team for further study. They will want to have a look at his brain.'

The Doctor grinned. ‘It is marvellous.’

‘Such insolence,’ the guard said. ‘Have you no fear?’

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Before the Doctor could reply, there was a terrible outcry from beyond the walls; hundreds of Canines barking in alarm. Both the guard and the leader turned to the door.

‘What is happening?’ the Alpha Male cried.

The guard raised his spear. ‘We are under attack, sir. The Greyhounds and Labradors must have formed an alliance against us again.’

The other imprisoned humans gripped the bars of their cages and began to shout.

‘Silence,’ the Alpha Male yelled. ‘Stop that racket immediately.’

‘If you want them to behave,’ the Doctor said, ‘then you have to promise them a treat.’

From outside came the unmistakable sound of a laser. A dog yelped in pain. Seconds later, the kennel door burst open, blown off its rusty hinges. K-9 surged into the jail, followed by an angry band of humans.

‘Good dog,’ the Doctor shouted. ‘You are a very good dog, K-9!’

‘Affirmative, Master,’ K-9 responded. ‘That is how I am programmed. You and the Mistress are saved.’

A red laser beam shot forth from his nose, knocking the spear from the guard’s paws. The guard yipped with pain. The Alpha Male backed

up, pressing against the cage. Leela leapt forward, thrust her arms through the bars, and grabbed him in a chokehold.

'Order your guard to open these cells,' she hissed in his ear, 'or I will squeeze the life from you.'

The humans were soon set free, and the surviving Canines were placed in the cages instead. Ben's imprisoned tribesmen lifted him on their shoulders, hailing him as a hero. They also thanked the Doctor and Leela, who were busy retrieving the items the Canines had stolen from them. The Doctor popped a jelly baby into his mouth and sighed with relief. Day-vid approached him.

'Your companion, K-9, has told me many things about you. Will you stay and help us? This pack is defeated, but the Canines still rule the city.'

The Doctor smiled. 'You won't need our assistance now. K-9 has helped you start the revolution. Once word spreads, other human tribes will stand up and join you. And besides, we have a pressing engagement elsewhere — unless, perhaps, one of you is up for a game of chess?'

Ben Gay-ul, son of Day-vid Kit-sun, united the human tribes and led the revolt against their Canine oppressors. In time, humanity defeated them and rebuilt Prague. Years later, when he was very old and grey, Ben still remembered the strange human who'd helped them. The man called the Dock-tor, who'd stepped inside that magical blue box and

vanished into thin air. He remembered Lee-la, beautiful and fierce. But most of all, he remembered K-9, and when he did, Ben smiled.

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He'd been a good dog.

84

Sunday Afternoon, AD 848,988

Paul Crilley

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor,

with Ace

The small room in the TARDIS was made to look like a 1950s living room. Ace knew the Doctor wanted her to ask the reason why he had done this, so she point-blank refused to do so. There probably *was* no reason. He could be so annoying sometimes.

Ace turned her attention back to the book lying open in her lap, then slammed it shut in irritation. She'd been trying to read the same passage

for over twenty minutes now, but nothing was sinking in. She dropped the book to the drably carpeted floor.

'Hey,' said the Doctor, looking up from his leather armchair. 'Be careful with that. It's a first edition.'

'So what. It's boring. Who cares if they guy's obsessed with a whale.'

'Just trying to educate you, Ace.'

'I'm not a kid any more, Doctor. I don't need educating.'

‘ *Everyone* needs education.’

Ace wondered if the Doctor was purposefully trying to wind her up. It was the kind of thing he always used to say, back when he was trying to

come across as the wise mentor. But that was years ago now, and he knew how much it irritated her.

‘And to answer your question,’ he said, ‘I just wanted to see if you could get through it. I’ve tried to read *Moby Dick* 112 times. Never got past the first ten pages.’

Ace opened her mouth to say something, only to realise there was nothing she *could* say.

‘What’s the matter with you, anyway?’ asked the Doctor.

‘I’m bored.’

‘You’re *what*?’

‘I’m bored.’

‘Don’t be absurd. How can you be bored?’

‘Because we’re not *doing* anything.’

‘We’re resting. Always wise to rest. Allows the spirit to loosen up. No stiffness, you see.’

‘Stiffness of the spirit?’

‘Of course. Well-catalogued condition.’

‘Yeah. Whatever.’ Ace sat up and rubbed her face. ‘Is it Sunday?’

The Doctor opened his mouth. Then snapped it shut again.

Eventually, he said, ‘Pardon me?’

‘It feels like a Sunday. A wet, boring Sunday back on the estate. This

was how I always felt.'

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'Ace, we're travelling through the time vortex. There *is* no Sunday.'

'Of course there is. The TARDIS can track the days, can't it?'

The Doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'I suppose...'

'Then bring us out. I bet you any money it's a Sunday.'

She waited for him in the console room.

He wandered in a moment later, threw her a dirty look, then fiddled with the controls. There was the briefest sensation of lurching, like riding in an lift, and they were out in normal space. The Doctor turned to the monitors.

'Well?' asked Ace, trying to peer over his shoulders.

'For your information, we have come out of the time stream some 847,000 years in your future. Mankind has broken free of the shackles of gravity and set sail to the distant stars. Alien species have evolved and died out. The planet is deserted.' He wound something that looked like a fishing reel and checked another monitor. He sighed deeply. 'And it's a Sunday.'

'Ha! I knew it!'

'Good. I'm glad you're satisfied.' He nodded at the monitor. 'In case you're wondering, that's Central Europe down there.'

‘Great. Let’s go sightseeing.’

‘I don’t think there’s anyone left alive.’

‘Oh. Well, let’s go anyway. See if there’s anything left.’

‘I don’t think—’

Ace watched as a frown crept across the Doctor’s brow. He flipped a

switch, then turned a dial. The image on the monitor zoomed rapidly in,

cutting through the wisps of white cloud that partially obscured the view.

‘How very strange,’ he muttered.

Ace stepped forward. She knew that tone. It meant something was

up, and if something was up it meant they had something to do. At last!

‘What’s strange?’

‘That.’ He pointed to the monitor.

Ace squinted. ‘Germany?’

‘It’s not Germany. It’s Prague. Or what used to be Prague.’

Ace shrugged her shoulders. ‘Prague? So what?’

‘I’ll tell you so what. The streets here.’ The Doctor traced a line

through the roads they could see clearly on the monitor. ‘They’ve been

formed into letters, Ace. Letters that can only be seen from space.’

‘What?’ Ace glanced between the monitor and the Doctor’s serious

face. ‘What do they say?’

‘What do they say? They say "SOS".’

Ace frowned at the monitor. ‘It’s not in English.’

‘No,’ muttered the Doctor, almost to himself. ‘No, it’s not English. It’s

Gallifreyan, Ace.’

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* * *

Ace opened the door to the TARDIS and glanced outside. Trees and bushes surrounded her. The Doctor had brought them down in a small copse of trees off to the side of the road that formed the SOS.

She stepped out onto the grass and took a deep breath of damp air. The day was grey and cloudy. A bank of mist drifted slowly down the distant hills off to their left. She had been right. The day had a distinctly

‘Sunday afternoon’ feel to it.

‘Prague’s changed a bit since the last time we were here, hasn’t it?’ she said.

The Doctor appeared behind her, squinted up at the sky, then decided against using his umbrella. He swung it over his shoulder instead and set off through the trees. ‘That was in the year 2050, Ace,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Of course it’s changed.’

‘What are we doing, Professor? I thought you said no one was left alive down here.’

‘Curiosity, Ace. You see, for anyone to see that SOS from space it had to have been incorporated into the initial planning of the road system.’

Ace looked around her with a faint air of distaste. ‘And when was that,

then?'

'Thirteen-forty-eight.'

Her head snapped around to look at him. 'Really?'

The Doctor smiled smugly. 'Really.'

Ace scuffed some gravel aside on the road and glanced back at the Doctor. He was kneeling on the ground staring at the remains of a statue. 'What's the problem?' she called.

He glanced up at her. 'Hmm? Oh, it's this.' He stood up and smacked the stone with his umbrella, then pointed at deep grooves in the ground.

'Looks like it's been moved recently.'

He looked thoughtfully around, then turned his attention to something in the undergrowth. Ace carried on walking up the gentle rise in the roadway. When she got to the top, she stopped and looked down the other side.

There were two men down there. Rolling a boulder off the road. They seemed to be arguing.

'You know,' said the Doctor, appearing behind her. 'I'm not so sure this place is deserted after all.'

'I think I agree with you there, Doctor.'

He peered around her shoulder.

'My goodness,' said the Doctor.

They stared for a moment.

'What are they doing?'

‘What does it look like they’re doing? They’re clearing the road.’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘I would imagine so we would be able to see the SOS from space,’ he said, and trotted over the rise, ignoring Ace’s hissed warnings to stay back. ‘Hallo hallo,’ called the Doctor as he strode forward, swinging his umbrella around in circles.

The two men jerked around and stared at him in astonishment. The boulder they had been pushing rolled back and forwards a few times before rocking to a standstill. One of the men — the younger of the two — stepped forward a few paces.

Ace caught up with the Doctor and grabbed hold of his arm.

‘Professor,’ she hissed. ‘Be careful. They could be dangerous.’

‘Nonsense,’ he proclaimed. ‘They’re the last two humans on the planet. I should think they’d be glad of the company.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ace doubtfully. ‘I don’t much like the look of him.’

She indicated the man at the front. His beard was long and tangled, his hair pulled back into an untidy ponytail.

‘Yes. He does have a bit of the "rough and tumble" about him, doesn’t he? In fact —’ The Doctor peered hard at the man. ‘Does that man not have any ears?’

‘Doesn’t look like it.’

The man half-turned and said something to his companion who still

stood in the background. This one had black-grey hair and a pointed beard, and looked a bit more cultured than his companion.

The Doctor stopped walking abruptly. Ace turned and saw that he was staring at the second man in amazement.

'What's wrong?'

The Doctor pointed with his umbrella. 'I think I know him,' he said with some astonishment.

'What?'

'That man. I know that man.'

'That's impossible.'

The Doctor started walking again, more rapidly this time. Not impossible, Ace. Just very, very improbable.'

'Hallo there,' he said, stopping a few feet from them. 'How are you?'

When he heard the Doctor speak, the older man broke into an amazed grin and rushed forward. He took the Doctor's hand between his and shook it vigorously.

'Much better, now that you are here. Much better indeed. I'm —'

'John Dee,' interrupted the Doctor. 'I know.'

The man frowned. 'You know? H-have we met?'

'Ye— Actually, I'm not sure. Tell me, were you still travelling through Europe before you ended up here?'

'Yes. Yes, I was. I still have a few more years to go before I return home.'

‘Then no, we haven’t met.’ The Doctor looked over Dee’s shoulder.

‘And you must be Edward Kelley.’

The man scowled suspiciously. ‘How do you know that?’

‘The ears.’ He leaned in to Ace. ‘Punishment for forgery,’ he whispered.

He leaned back and smiled widely. ‘So tell me — how on earth did the both of you end up here? I’m sure it must be a *terribly* fascinating tale.’

‘It was the angels,’ said Dee promptly. ‘They brought us here.’

‘The angels? How marvellous. Any particular reason? I mean, I know you’ve been communicating with them for a while now. But why here?’

He looked around. ‘It doesn’t seem very hospitable.’

Dee nodded his head. ‘I agree. Apparently it’s some kind of test before we’re to be inducted into the secret knowledge.’

‘Ah, yes,’ mused the Doctor. ‘The old "secret knowledge" spiel. So tell me — what does the test involve?’

Edward Kelley pulled a knife from his belt and stepped swiftly forward, pressing it against the Doctor’s throat. Ace cursed beneath her breath and turned to cover Dee, but the old man scrambled back with a look of alarm.

‘Easy now, Kelley. There’s no need for that.’

‘Of course there is. To answer your question,’ he said to the Doctor,

‘the test involves us making sure any visitors we come across are taken

before the angel Uriel.’

‘Is that so?’ The Doctor glanced at Ace and, to her surprise, he

winked at her. ‘Right,’ he said, trying to keep a straight face. ‘Take me to

your leader.’

Their leader turned out to live inside a mud hut situated in the middle

of an empty field. When they arrived Dee disappeared inside, leaving the

two of them alone with Kelley. Ace tried to manoeuvre herself into a

position where she could take him down but the Doctor saw what she

was planning and shook his head sharply. A moment later Dee stepped

back outside, wringing his hands nervously.

‘Uriel will see you now,’ he said.

‘Jolly good,’ said the Doctor, and stepped through the door. Ace

scrambled forward to catch up, stepping through the door and finding

herself in a small, square room with rushes spread neatly across the

floor. The Doctor stood two paces away, looking around with interest.

‘So it’s true,’ sobbed a voice. ‘Finally. Another Time Lord.’

Ace spun around to find a man staggering towards the Doctor, arms

outspread. Before she could do anything, the man had him trapped in a

hug.

‘Easy there,’ said the Doctor. The man ignored him and sobbed into

his jacket. The Doctor winced and awkwardly patted him on the back.

‘There, there,’ he said. ‘It can’t be that bad.’

The man let go and lurched back a step. ‘Can’t be that bad? *Can’t be that bad?* ’

‘That’s what I said, yes.’

‘But I’ve been stuck in Prague since 1380!’

The Doctor blinked. ‘Oh.’ He blinked again. ‘That is a long time.’

‘Yes. You see now why I’m so happy to see you?’

‘Indeed.’ The Doctor glanced at Ace from the corner of his eyes. ‘Why don’t you tell us about it? From the start. Uriel, isn’t it?’

Uriel ran his hands through his thinning hair. ‘Yes. Uriel. At the start. Good idea.’ He looked around. ‘Sorry I can’t offer you some refreshments. As you can see, we’re the last people on Earth.’

‘Yes. About that.’ He pointed over his shoulder. ‘John Dee and Edward Kelley. How did they get here?’

‘I have absolutely no idea.’

The Doctor struggled to mask his confusion, then gave up. ‘I’m sorry. Didn’t you say you’re a Time Lord?’

‘Yes! But I don’t know how they ended up here. I landed in Prague in 1380 and my TARDIS was destroyed.’

‘Oh, dear.’

‘Exactly. Beyond repair.’

‘Forgive me. Why Prague? Why that date?’

Uriel looked embarrassed. ‘It was… well, a slight miscalculation, I’m

afraid. Something went wrong — and I was forced into an emergency landing. It didn't quite go to plan, and my TARDIS was damaged.'

'I see.'

'Well, I had to do *something*, didn't I? Something to get me out of there. So over the years I managed to insinuate myself into the social circles of Prague aristocracy. I had a plan, you see.'

'The SOS-shaped road?'

' *Exactly*. And it worked,' he said proudly.

'Indeed. Just 847,608 years later.'

'Well, obviously I haven't been here all that time. You see, I let it be known that I was an architect, one of the best in Europe. That got me into the inner circle of King Charles, where I managed to convince him to

build New Town. I even got him to let me design it.'

'Hence the road shape?'

'Exactly. I was hoping someone like yourself might see it from space and come and rescue me.'

'And?'

'And nothing happened for a while.'

'A while?'

'Till 1586.'

The Doctor nodded.

'By then I was one of King Rudolph II's drinking partners. That's

where I saw those two. Dee and Kelley. They arrived at the court talking

about having to deliver some kind of divine message to Rudolph. Kelley

was spewing all this stuff about a philosopher's stone. I don't like him

much,' he added. 'Strange face. Very untrustworthy. Not sure what it is.'

'Could it be the lack of ears?'

'He doesn't have ears? Really?'

'You never noticed?'

Uriel shrugged. 'Best not to pay too much attention to the help.

Especially when they think you're an angel.'

'Ah yes. I was wondering when you would get to that.'

'Hmm? Oh, I simply told them that to get them to lend a hand. But I'm

getting ahead of myself. Dee and Kelley disappeared one day. Just

vanished from inside their rooms at the castle. No one knows where they

went. Just as well really. The Pope had ordered Rudolph to burn them as

heretics. Very insecure, these religious types. A few years later — 1591,

to be exact — another Time Lord saw my message and came to rescue

me.'

'And then?'

'Well, that's where it gets strange. For some reason known only to

him, this Time Lord brought me here. Well, not *here*. He brought me

here, but five years ago.'

‘And then?’

‘Then he deserted me!’

‘Rather unsporting of him.’

‘I know! Anyway, it gets stranger. When I step out of the TARDIS, who do I see lying on the grass before me? Dee and Kelley, that’s who. Gave me a bit of a fright, I can tell you.’

‘I can imagine. And they didn’t know how they came to be there?’

‘Not a clue. They seemed rather reluctant to talk to me, actually. Seemed to hold me in some awe. Since then we’ve been clearing the road. Well, I say clearing, but there’s not much left of it, to be honest. We’ve been putting chalk down over where I remember the road to be.’

‘Very enterprising.’

‘And here you are.’

‘Here I am. So I take it you’d like me to drop you somewhere?’ Uriel smiled. ‘Would you? I’d be eternally grateful.’

‘No problem. We’ll just take Dee and Kelley back to their own time and we’ll be off.’

They headed back to where they had parked the TARDIS, the Doctor and Ace taking the lead.

‘I don’t like it,’ whispered Ace. ‘He’s strange, Professor. Not like you at all.’

‘And thank goodness for that. Where would we be if every Gallifreyan was like me? Or if every human was like yourself?’

‘He just doesn’t act like a Time Lord.’

‘He does seem a bit... scatterbrained,’ said the Doctor. ‘But that could be stress. He’s been stranded for quite some time now. He didn’t know if he would ever be rescued. That’s got to affect you a bit.’

‘Just keep an eye on him,’ muttered Ace.

‘That’s what I have you for!’

The Doctor grinned at her and veered off the road into the tree line.

Ace followed, stopping when they came in sight of the familiar blue box.

She turned to make sure the others were following, then froze. Uriel had stopped in his tracks. He looked like he was in pain or something.

‘Doctor?’ she called.

‘I see it,’ he said, stepping past her. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked, stopping in front of Uriel.

"Uh... fine. Fine. Just had a pain in my chest there for a second.’

‘Don’t worry. Once we’re inside I’ll make you a nice cup of tea. You’ll be right as rain.’

Ace pushed the door open and stepped inside. The Doctor swept passed her and started fiddling with the controls.

‘Fifteen-ninety-one,’ he muttered to himself. He glanced over his shoulder. ‘We’ll see if we can sort out this rather unsporting Time Lord who deserted you, yes?’ He smiled and turned back, yanking on a lever.

The familiar noise of the TARDIS dematerialisation rolled through the room. ‘And we’re on our way.’

There was a cry of pain behind Ace. She whirled around to find Dee collapsing to the floor and Uriel grabbing hold of Kelley’s knife and holding it to his throat.

"Uriel,’ said the Doctor. ‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to commandeer your TARDIS, Doctor. Hope you don’t mind.’

‘Actually, I do rather.’

‘Tough.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the controls. ‘Pull us out the time stream. Now.’

The Doctor sighed and did as instructed.

‘Now. You.’ He nodded at Ace. ‘Drag him outside.’

Ace looked at the Doctor, biting back the urge to say ‘I told you so,’ and dragged Dee across the floor. She glanced around as she stepped backwards out of the TARDIS. The trees and undergrowth still looked the

same. Maybe a bit younger. She reckoned they had only come back a few years.

The Doctor stepped out, fixing his hat firmly on his head. ‘This is all very unsporting of you, you know.’

‘Tough,’ said Uriel from the doorway. He reversed the knife and slammed the pommel hard into Kelley’s head. Kelley collapsed unconscious onto the grass. Moments later Ace watch in horror as the TARDIS faded from view.

She whirled on the Doctor. ‘Why didn’t you do something? Now we’re stuck here just like he was! What are we going to do?’

The Doctor held up a finger and cocked his head to the side, an irritating smile on his face.

‘What?’ snapped Ace.

And then she heard it. The distant sounds of the TARDIS fading away suddenly grew in strength once again, but this time from somewhere behind them. She turned and watched as the police box slowly rematerialised, but this time on the other side of the clearing. The TARDIS door opened and a second Doctor, the twin of the one standing next to Ace, poked his head out.

‘Is he gone?’ he called.

‘Just left,’ called the Doctor.

The other Doctor ducked back inside and reappeared a moment later dragging John Dee. Then Ace found herself in the strange position of watching herself follow after the Doctor with an unconscious Kelley. She studied them. They were definitely Kelley and Dee, but they looked a bit younger than the two lying at Ace’s feet. And much better groomed.

‘Professor,’ whispered Ace. ‘Please tell me what’s going on.’

‘I’m not sure. But I dare say it will come to us.’

The other Ace and Doctor deposited their burdens. Ace glanced up

once she had done this and gave the watching Ace a sympathetic smile,

as if to say ‘Sorry. I know as much as you do,’ then she and the Doctor took hold of the older Dee and Kelley and dragged them back to the TARDIS.

‘Why didn’t you tell me those jeans make my bum look big?’ asked Ace in a daze.

The Doctor ignored her as the other Doctor poked his head back out of the TARDIS door and tipped his hat to them. The Doctor responded in

kind. A moment later, the TARDIS disappeared.

Ace stared down at the new Dee and Kelley. ‘What on earth —’

The Doctor held a finger up for silence. ‘One moment,’ he said. Ace snapped her mouth shut. ‘If my calculations are correct…’

Then they both heard it. The pulsing sound of the TARDIS. Again.

Ace looked around in astonishment. ‘Just what is going on here?’

‘No time.’ The Doctor grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to the edge of the clearing. A second later the TARDIS faded into view exactly

where it had been when Uriel stole it. The door swung open and Uriel stepped out. But it wasn’t the same Uriel. Like Dee and Kelley, he was much better groomed, and wearing different clothes. He took a few steps

forwards and stopped short when he saw Dee and Kelley lying on the grass before him.

‘How did you two get here?’ he asked in astonishment.

The Doctor and Ace snuck behind him and slipped back into the TARDIS, closing and locking the doors behind them.

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Once they were under way again, the Doctor clapped his hands together. ‘Right. That’s that sorted out.’

‘ *Excuse* me?’ said Ace acidly.

He turned to her. ‘What?’

‘What do you mean, *what*? Are you joking? Why did we just see our doubles? Why did Uriel come back? Why did he look different?’

‘Yes. It is rather confusing, isn’t it? But surely you’ve figured it out. Smart girl like yourself.’

‘Figured what out?’

‘It’s very simple. The story he told of being picked up by a Time Lord in 1591? A lie. All of it. He’s not even a Time Lord.’

‘How did you work that one out?’

‘Simple deduction. If my suspicions are correct, I think he’s a Raagr’an, a very long-lived species from out in Betelgeuse somewhere.’

‘And he knows Gallifreyan?’

‘He probably picked up a bit here and there.’

Ace put her head in her hands. ‘Please explain. And use small words.’

‘Okay. When we first arrived in Prague, that was about five years into the future of the Prague we just left. We met Uriel and took him to the

TARDIS. I punched in the coordinates to take us back to 1591. When Uriel put the knife to Kelley's throat and ordered us out of the time stream we'd only travelled five years into the past. Understand so far?'

'Yes.'

'Good. When Uriel stole the TARDIS, it carried on back to the date I had programmed, which was the date he told me he was rescued — 1591. Now, the Uriel who was stuck in 1591, the younger version who was stranded there, he spots the TARDIS and hides out of sight. The Uriel we just met, the older one who stole *our* TARDIS, gets out. The original Uriel either knocks him out or just steps into the TARDIS and steals it for himself.'

'Hang on. Won't he have recognised himself?'

'I doubt he saw his face. He would have been concentrating on getting into the TARDIS. Now, all that story about being rescued by a Time Lord who dropped him in future Prague and then just deserted him? Obviously a lie. It was my TARDIS the whole time. The TARDIS brought the younger Uriel back along the time stream to its last stop, which was where we were waiting, where the future Uriel kicked *us* out.

The younger Uriel steps out of the TARDIS, spots Dee and Kelley — that

much of his story was true — we sneak back inside and take back what

belongs to us. *That's* how he really got stranded in the future.'

He smiled smugly.

Ace looked confused as she tried to figure it out. 'So this is where he

originally landed? And over the next five years he and the other two will

clear the roads and we will spot the SOS and land. Then he will steal the

TARDIS and drop us...'

'Best not to think about it too much. It just gets stressful. That was

why he looked shocked when we led him to the TARDIS. He recognised

it as the TARDIS that he stole in 1591.'

'But what about our doubles? Why did they drop off another Dee and

Kelley and take the ones that were there?'

'Hmm. Yes, that is a tough one.'

'And... how did Dee and Kelley get into the future in the first place?'

'What?'

'Well, Uriel said he arrived in the future and stepped out of the

TARDIS, and they were already there. So how did they get there?'

'Well, obviously, we brought them there from five years in the future.

When Uriel forced us out of the time stream.'

'But that doesn't work. They were only at that spot where the younger

Uriel stepped out of the TARDIS because *we* took them there. Did it...

did it have something to do with our doubles?'

The Doctor frowned and turned his back on her, deep in thought.

'Wait a minute,' said Ace. 'What did Uriel say? That Dee and Kelly

just disappeared one day in 1586? What if—'

‘I’ve got it!’ the Doctor whirled around and pulled on the controls.

‘Hold on, Ace.’

The Doctor opened the door and peered out. Ace looked over his shoulder and saw they were in a lushly furnished bedroom. A dying fire crackled quietly in a large grate. Other than the orange glow, there was no source of light in the room.

‘Right. Let’s go.’

He snuck out of the TARDIS, Ace following close behind. There were two doors in the room. ‘You take that one,’ he said. ‘It should lead to Kelley’s chambers.’

Ace nodded and stepped up to the door. She wrinkled her nose at the pungent scent wafting up from the bunched-up material in her hand. She pressed her ear against the wood and heard someone cough, then clear his throat. She gently eased down the handle and pushed it open. Kelley sat at a desk with his back to Ace, reading from a book. He paused and yawned, leaning back in his chair to stretch luxuriously. Ace snuck up behind him and pressed the cloth to his face. Kelley’s mouth opened as he tried to cry out, but all that accomplished was to make him inhale the fumes.

Two seconds later he was slumped in Ace’s arms.

‘Serves you right for being such a miserable old prat,’ she said as she grabbed him beneath the arms and dragged him into the bedroom. The Doctor was already there, pulling Dee along the carpet and into the TARDIS. Ace followed after and the two men were soon laid out neatly

on the floor.

‘Now what?’ asked Ace, staring down at them.

‘Now we go back,’ said the Doctor.

He activated the TARDIS, then fiddled with the controls. A few moments later he brought them out into real space again.

‘Right,’ he said. He bent down to grab Kelley. ‘No, hold on. You had Kelley, didn’t you?’ He took Dee instead, dragging him to the door. He pushed it open and poked his head out. ‘Is he gone?’ he called. Ace watched from behind. There they were, across the clearing, staring at them in the TARDIS. The other Ace’s mouth hung open in astonishment.

The Doctor ducked back inside and grabbed Dee, pulling him out onto the grass. Ace followed his lead, and they lay them both in the clearing.

Ace looked up and gave herself a sympathetic smile, then they took the older versions and pulled them back into the TARDIS. The Doctor popped his head out once, doffed his hat with a grin, then shut the doors.

‘Do you understand now?’ he asked Ace.

‘I think so.’

‘Good. So maybe you can tell me our next step.’

Ace thought about it for a second. ‘We drop these two off in 1586? A few days after they disappeared.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Spot on. Although I think we’ll drop them in France. Wouldn’t want Rudolph catching them again. Not with the Pope baying for their blood.’

He turned to the controls and activated the TARDIS. The pleasing sounds of time being manipulated and controlled pulsed through the console room.

‘I hate paradoxes,’ said Ace, walking off in a huff. ‘They make my head hurt.’

‘Well, Sunday is the day of rest,’ called the Doctor after her. ‘Maybe you should have a lie down. Put your feet up. Read a book. Rest the spirit.’

Nanomorphosis

Stephen Dedman

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Sarah Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan

‘We’re lost again, aren’t we?’

The Doctor looked up briefly from the TAROTS console at the

blackness of the scanner screen, then reached into the pocket of his long

brown coat and removed a yo-yo. ‘One gravity exactly, and a hundred

per cent natural. None of this artificial stuff,’ he said, after a few seconds,

then turned to the atmosphere analyser, and smiled toothily. ‘Nitrogen,

oxygen, carbon oxides, humidity 87 per cent, traces of pollen... Earth, or

the most convincing copy of it I’ve ever seen.’

‘ *Where* on Earth?’ Sarah Jane asked, not really expecting an answer.

The Doctor didn’t bother walking around the console to look at the

display that was supposed to tell them their exact position in the time-

space continuum. He’d made several attempts to repair it, but it

steadfastly maintained that it was six o’clock and they were somewhere

under Oxford. ‘Northern hemisphere,’ he said, more confidently than he

felt perhaps.

Harry Sullivan looked mildly alarmed. ‘Can you narrow it down? Look

at the stars or something?'

'No. I'm fairly sure we're in a windowless room in some sort of building. Roughly four hundred metres above sea level, and... that's interesting.'

Sarah Jane Smith looked over his shoulder. In her experience, the Doctor used 'interesting' as a euphemism for 'incredibly dangerous'.

'High concentration of nanobots,' he proclaimed, his grin becoming even wider. 'Twenty-fourth century, almost certainly. And the pollens indicate we're in Europe.' He pocketed the yo-yo.

'So why have we stopped?'

The Doctor scrambled around the console, looking at the read-outs.

'Radiation damage, I think — probably the solar flares. She needs to reboot and reconfigure some of the systems. Don't you, old girl?'

'How long will that take?'

'A few hours. We won't be late getting back. So, shall we do a little sightseeing while we're here?'

'Wherever here is,' muttered Sarah, as she followed the men out.

The Doctor pretended not to hear her as he pulled a torch out of his pocket and opened the door. The beam illuminated a malevolent staring face atop a huge armless body that reminded Sarah of a giant robot, or a mummy case for an overweight pharaoh. The Doctor approached this, and knocked on the chest. 'Nobody home,' he said, relieved.

‘What is it?’

The Doctor looked down until he found a small plaque. ‘"The Virgin of Nuremberg",’ he read. ‘An iron maiden. I think I’ve been here before.’

That didn’t sound very reassuring, thought Sarah, until it occurred to her that the red carpet on the floor wasn’t very practical for a torture chamber. She glanced at the plaque, and sighed with relief. ‘We’re in a museum?’

‘Yes.’ The Doctor swung the light around the room, looking at the framed pictures on the walls, then walked up to a small sign. ‘"Finger nails will be ripped from anyone caught littering... Torture Museum, Prague. Advertisement, 2007." He nodded. ‘I suppose twenty-first-century advertising would be considered a form of torture.’ He led the way into the next room, with Harry and Sarah following him nervously as

he walked down the stairs and through another torture chamber, this one

dominated by a rack and a collection of scold’s bridles.

‘Jolly gruesome sort of place,’ muttered Harry. ‘Do you think they do children’s parties?’

‘Oh, I’m —’ The Doctor stopped suddenly, and stared at a new-looking device: a coffin-like box topped with what seemed to be cotton

wool, another similarly shaped box supported about two metres above this by shiny brass poles and, between them, a naked human figure strapped to the lower box and a glistening apparatus of glass, needles, cogwheels and steel ribbon. ‘That’s interesting.’

Oh, no, thought Sarah. Not again.

Harry walked up to the device, and squatted down to look at the figure on the bed. ‘That is interesting,’ he agreed, looking at the intricate tattoos — no, not tattoos, Sarah saw, fresh weals. ‘If I didn’t know this was an exhibit, I’d say he’d been dead less than an hour.’ He touched a hand. ‘Hypostasis just beginning to set in, no rigour... this is really...’

‘Real,’ said the Doctor.

Harry didn’t recoil, though his face turned slightly pale. He looked at the hand more closely, then at the weals around the man’s waist, then scuttled around the device to examine the calluses on the man’s feet. ‘I say! It certainly looks real,’ he agreed. ‘And judging by his face, it must have been a horrible death.’

Sarah found herself unable to look away from the body’s wounds.

‘I think these are words —’ She stopped, as another human figure emerged from the darkness — this one clad in a uniform of black and grey, which made him look eerily like a floating disembodied head.

The Doctor noticed her startled expression, turned around, and looked the face in the eye. ‘How do you do?’ he asked politely.

‘What are you doing here?’ the figure asked. His tone was polite, but guarded.

‘Oh, just passing through,’ said the Doctor. ‘We were just admiring the exhibit. Extremely convincing. Is it new?’

The figure blinked quickly. ‘It wasn’t here yesterday,’ he said, and examined the man’s face, then his fingerprints. ‘And this is unmodified biomass. Professor Hrabal. What do you know about this?’

‘No more than you do,’ said the Doctor, looking at the man’s badges. ‘We arrived here less than a minute before you did... Inspector?’

‘Rychtar,’ said the inspector. ‘And your names?’

‘This is Sarah Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan. I’m called the Doctor. Would you like a jelly baby — no, of course you wouldn’t. You’re a robot, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I am a robot,’ said Rychtar, scanning the three of them. ‘A nanomorph android, to be precise, and permanently linked to the city computer. We have old data on a being known as the Doctor, and you match his description and biometrics in some respects, but not in others. And neither of your companions is in my files. I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me. Will you agree to a psychoprobe?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, before the others could speak. ‘And if I remember the laws correctly, Inspector, you do not have the authority to compel the three of us based on the evidence available.’

Inspector Rychtar didn’t even blink. ‘True. However, I can hold you on a charge of trespassing while a forensic investigation proceeds. Come with me, please.’

Sarah saw another three figures in identical uniforms. They seemed

to emerge from the carpet, one beside each of the three travellers. The Doctor nodded, and let Rychtar lead the way onto the Mostecka. He shuddered slightly at the sign for the Museum of Spiders and Scorpions next door, and Rychtar smiled slightly.

'You dislike spiders, Doctor?'

'Only when they're taller than I am.'

The sun was rising, and he looked around at the old city, smiling at the beauty of its Gothic and Romanesque architecture.

'I thought you said this was 2400,' whispered Sarah, glancing at the façade of a notorious twentieth-century fast-food restaurant nearby.

'The whole city's been preserved as it was more than two centuries ago,' the Doctor replied. 'It was listed as a world heritage site, and after nanotechnology made it possible to repair any damage instantly, it was effectively frozen in time — even the parts of it that should probably have been erased from history. Of course, most of the original molecules have now been replaced by nanomorphs, but the larger structure is the same.'

'What was that about the laws?' asked Harry, as they were ushered along the street towards a bridge decorated with statues of saints.

'The use of psychoprobes is restricted,' the Doctor replied. 'With all the surveillance technology that's been developed since your time, privacy has become even more valuable — especially in a city like this,

where all public spaces are constantly monitored so the nanobots can do

their work. It means that it's difficult to legally enter any person's private

property uninvited, especially the insides of their heads. The inspector

could decide to probe one of us, but if it was the wrong one, the evidence

would be inadmissible and we could sue the city. And without a

psychoprobe, the chances of a conviction are almost nil. Isn't that

correct, Inspector?'

'Yes,' said Rychtar. 'However, as you pointed out, all public spaces in

the city are constantly monitored, and that includes the interior of the

museum. I'm sure that we'll soon discover who murdered Professor

Hrabal.'

Their cell under the Police Museum was small, but the benches

turned into luxurious couches or beds as required, and the walls seemed

to change colour to suit Sarah's mood — or maybe her mood kept

changing to suit the colours. She looked up at the faintly glowing ceiling,

and asked, 'Can they hear us?'

'Yes,' replied the Doctor, who was reclining on one of the other

benches. 'And see us. Most of the matter in this city is now made up of

nanomorphs, which means that it's all effectively alive.'

'Except for Professor Hrabal, at least,' said Harry. 'How did those...

police... come out of nowhere like that? And their car — it just rose out of

the street.'

'They're nanomorph robots. So is Inspector Rychtar. They can appear

in any public place in an instant, just by sending their pattern through the

city computer and reshaping the matter wherever they want to be.'

'Are there any humans here?' asked Sarah.

'Oh, yes; students mostly. All the work is done by robots, though.

Animating matter is a Prague tradition: Rabbi Loew built his golem

here, and it's where Karel Capek invented the word "robot". I can show

you their graves, if we have time.'

There was a knock on the door, which then reshaped itself into the

form of Inspector Rychtar. 'My apologies for any inconvenience,' said the

android. 'You can collect your belongings at the desk. Would you like

some breakfast before you go?'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, standing, his grin returning. 'I gather the

cameras at the museum showed that we were innocent?'

'They showed Professor Hrabal's murder. He was carried from his

home shortly after sunset, and tortured to death over a period of nearly

12 hours. You did not materialise inside the museum until he was

already dead.'

'And the murderer?' asked Harry.

Rychtar looked at their faces carefully. 'Doctor, you are known here.

Do you vouch for your companions?'

'Of course!'

'Very well. Professor Hrabal was murdered by robots.'

The Doctor blinked. 'I thought that was impossible.'

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'It is supposed to be, yes. I'm afraid we're dealing with someone clever enough to hack into the automatic functions of the city computer.

This means that we can't yet rule you out, though it doesn't constitute grounds for an involuntary psychoprobe. But I would ask that you and your companions not leave town until we can clear you.'

'That seems a reasonable request.'

'And because the museum is now a crime scene, it has been closed off. Including, I'm afraid, the room where your — police box? — appeared.'

The Doctor's grin faltered slightly, but he nodded. 'Do you have any other clues?' he asked, as he followed Rychtar to his office.

'That machine carved some words into Professor Hrabal's body. It took some time to decipher them, but it turned out to be "respect your superiors" in an old dead language called German. I understand you're a scholar of languages?'

Explaining the Time Lords' gift would have taken too long, so the Doctor merely replied, 'In a modest way.'

'Are you familiar with the works of Franz Kafka?'

‘Didn’t he write *The Trial*?’ asked Harry. ‘And that story about the giant cockroach?’

‘ *Metamorphosis*,’ said Rychtar, nodding. ‘Yes. Kafka lived here in Prague for many years, but he wrote in German. He also wrote a story called *In the Penal Colony*, in which a device called a harrow is used to torture prisoners to death, by inscribing the rule that they’ve broken into their flesh. The victim in the story had "respect your superiors" carved around his waist.’

Harry winced. ‘And I thought the Navy’s disciplinary boards were pretty harsh.’

The Doctor ignored him. ‘Who were Professor Hrabal’s superiors?’

‘He was the bursar, so only the chancellor would have been above him.’

‘At Charles University?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you checked his alibi?’

‘Hers, yes. She was home with her husbands, but the program could have been written at any time. She has the skill, but no known motive.’

‘Did he have any enemies?’

Rychtar didn’t speak again until they were all in his office and the door was closed. ‘A lot of students and ex-students might have cause to dislike him. He had the final say on who could and could not study at the

university, or work there. Apart from that, though, we don't know of any

enemies. Tom Knedlik, one of my deputies, is going through the archives

in search of any more information on him; he already has a large datafile

on his movements, but whether it will tell us anything, I don't know.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I may be able to help you, but I'll need to see the

crime scene again, and I'll also need some... items from the box in the

museum.'

'Agreed. However, at least one of your friends will need to stay with

us. We will find you more comfortable accommodation than a cell, of

course.'

Great, thought Sarah.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Has Professor Hrabal's body been

moved?'

'It's in the morgue now.'

'Harry, would you like to examine the body? I won't be long.'

Sarah stared at the Doctor as he emerged from the wardrobe, now

wearing a deerstalker hat. 'You came back here for that?'

The Doctor didn't reply, but walked out of the TARDIS and back to the

room where Inspector Rychtar was examining the harrow. If the

inspector was surprised by the Doctor's costume, he didn't show it. 'Is

that datafile ready yet?' the Doctor asked.

‘Tom’s putting it in now,’ Rychtar replied, ‘but I’m afraid we have another problem. I hope your dislike of giant spiders doesn’t extend to other arthropods?’

Their streetcar stopped outside a cubist apartment building, and quickly dissolved back into the street, leaving the Doctor, the inspector and Sarah standing on the cobbles. The inspector led the way to a small cluttered room on the top floor, its walls lined with bookshelves, then into an even smaller bedroom.

Sarah was shocked by what she saw: an insect the size of a surfboard huddled in one corner. The Doctor removed a large magnifying glass from the pocket of his coat, and examined the rotting apple embedded in the creature’s back.

‘How do you do?’ he asked. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

The creature didn’t reply.

‘The apartment belongs to Bedrich Polak, a student and assistant librarian at the university,’ said Rychtar. ‘He didn’t turn up to work this morning, and we can’t locate him... unless this is him.’

The insect banged its head on the floor at this. The Doctor blinked, and looked at the creature’s face. ‘Nod if you can understand me,’ he said. The insect bobbed its head up and down furiously.

‘Interesting.’ The Doctor sniffed cautiously — the only thing Sarah

could smell was the scent of fermenting apple. ‘Could this body be a nanomorph form?’ he asked Rychtar.

‘It is.’

‘With a human brain inside?’

‘That’s possible,’ said the inspector. The insect nodded again. ‘You’re Bedrich Polak?’

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Another nod.

‘You can understand me, but you can’t talk?’

Another nod. The Doctor thought for a moment, then asked, ‘Do you know who did this to you?’

Bedrich hesitated, then waggled its head from side to side.

‘Would you submit to a psychoprobe, so we can be sure that you really are Bedrich Polak?’

The insect nodded, but Rychtar cleared his throat. ‘I can’t accept that as consent,’ he said sadly. ‘The law says it has to be in writing, unless the subject is comatose.’

‘Clever,’ the Doctor murmured, then looked at the books piled beside the bed. ‘You’re studying Kafka?’ he asked.

A nod.

‘Interesting. Sarah, can you go and get Harry? And, Inspector, can you get an entomologist to scan Mr Polak, and tell me just what species

he is? Don’t take size into consideration.’

Harry Sullivan looked through the windows of the streetcar as they passed the Kafka Memorial. Sarah followed his gaze and saw it too: a bronze statue, nearly four metres high, of a child-sized Franz Kafka riding a gigantic empty three-piece suit.

'The Doctor really thinks that this chap's been turned into a giant beetle?' said Harry.

'An extinct species of bedbug, he said,' replied Sarah. 'According to one of the professors, Kafka didn't specify what sort of insect his character was turned into, and students have been arguing about it for years. I read the story a long time ago, but I —' The streetcar stopped outside the cubist house and dissolved, and Sarah turned towards the door — then screamed. The memorial had stepped off its plinth and was lumbering towards them, taking two-metre strides.

Sarah grabbed Harry's arm, dragging him along with her as she ran into the building. She pushed on the button for the nanomorph lift, and the doors opened instantly. The statue walked up to the doorway, pushed the door open, and took a great step forwards, knocking the smaller figure from the shoulders of the larger. The headless giant stopped in the foyer, confused, and waited for its jockey to tell it where to go. The lift doors closed, and Sarah let out her breath in a sigh of relief.

'Do you think it can follow us?' asked Harry.

'I don't know!' They hurtled into Polak's apartment, where the Doctor

was conducting a rather one-sided conversation with the giant bedbug.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said. ‘Bedrich was just telling me how he

thought he should be a scarab, species *Sisyphus*, and —’

‘There’s something chasing us!’ Sarah panted. ‘A statue —’

‘ *Two* statues,’ said Harry.

There was a sudden splintering sound as eight hundred kilos of

animated bronze battered the door down. The small Kafka statue was

the first into the room, leading its headless companion by the sleeve. The

Doctor stared at them for a moment, until Harry slammed the bedroom

door shut and propped a chair under the handle. The Doctor nodded,

then opened the large round-topped window and looked down at the

four-storey drop to the street. He glanced at the mattress on the bed, and

said urgently, ‘Harry! Don’t just stand there! Help me!’

Harry blinked, then grabbed the other end of the mattress and hauled

it through the window. The Doctor tied one end of his scarf to the bed,

then grabbed the other and dropped it through the window. ‘How are you

at climbing?’ he asked his friends.

The door bulged inwards as the larger statue rammed into it, shoulder

first. Sarah grabbed the scarf and clambered out of the window, feet first.

The wool stretched slightly as it took her weight, and she descended hastily until there was no more scarf to hold onto and her feet were dangling just above the ground floor window. She glanced down at the mattress, and let go.

She looked up a moment later to see Harry rappelling awkwardly down the wall, while the gigantic bedbug climbed out of the window and scuttled across the concrete, its feet clinging to the weathered beige surface. The Doctor leaned out of the window, waiting for Harry to reach the ground, then cupped his hands in front of his mouth and called, ‘Stay close to the wall!’

The door shuddered again, and the Doctor moved the chair from under its handle, stepped aside, and counted down. An instant before the giant statue rammed into it again, he flung the door open, and watched the huge headless figure hurtle blindly through the room and out the window on the other side. The Doctor rushed to the window and looked down, relieved to see that the statue’s momentum had carried it past the mattress and into the middle of the road.

The Doctor climbed hastily down the scarf, as the footless statue scrambled back onto its cuffs and began groping blindly towards Harry and Sarah. The Doctor drew a deep breath, and yelled, ‘Taxi!’

A car emerged from the cobbles, and the Doctor scrambled in, with Sarah and Harry climbing in behind him.

‘Where to?’ asked a polite voice.

‘Somewhere where there are no statues or gargoyles.’ When the taxi didn’t move, he said, ‘Police museum!’

The taxi lurched into motion, leaving the blundering statue behind. ‘Is that going to help?’ asked Harry. ‘No statues?’

‘If he has to make statues from scratch, it’ll buy us a little time — maybe enough for me to narrow down the list of suspects. We’re looking for someone with a grudge against Professor Hrabal and Bedrich Polak.

Hrabal gave Bedrich his job and his scholarship, so it might be someone

who missed out on both. He knows computers, and he knows at least something about Kafka, but that still leaves dozens of students. If he thinks the insect in *Metamorphosis* was a bedbug, that narrows it down, so I’ve asked Bedrich to try to remember who might have argued with him.’

* * *

Zuzana Novotny was selling her paintings outside the Dancing House, and sketching a view of the Vltava River when the giant beetle lumbered into view and headed straight for her easel. Zuzana had

lived

in Prague long enough to know that this wasn't one of the regular tourist

attractions — unlike the golem, the Mozart impersonators or the strange-

looking building behind her — but she was still irritated enough to call the

police when the creature grabbed her palette.

A cop emerged from the pavement instantly, and a few minutes later,

a curly headed man in a deerstalker hat climbed from a police car and

approached the giant bedbug as though greeting an old friend. The

insect had dipped its proboscis in her paint, and was writing on the

pavement. 'He's been asking for you, Doctor,' said the cop.

Zuzana stepped back as a man and a woman emerged from the car,

and stared up at the towers — one of which seemed to be wearing a skirt

— as though they were much stranger than a giant bedbug. 'They call it

the Dancing House, or the Fred-and-Ginger building,' Zuzana explained,

automatically going into tour-guide mode for the strangely dressed

visitors. 'It was modelled after two famous ballroom dancers, or so I've

heard.'

The Doctor squatted down by the paper that the insect had scrawled

on. 'You've thought of a suspect?' he asked.

The bedbug nodded. 'JOSEF K,' it wrote, before one of the towers

lifted up its supporting pillars and stepped on him.

The Doctor stared up at the Dancing House, grabbed the paper, and began running away from the dancing edifice. Sarah watched as androids dissolved into the road, while the tourists and pavement artists

scattered. Some leaped into the river to avoid the erratically moving structure as it chased the Doctor along the street, trying unsuccessfully to stomp on him. Harry grabbed Sarah's hand to prevent her following him as he headed for the nearest bridge.

'What is it doing?' asked the woman with the easel.

'The tango?'

Sarah stared at Harry incredulously. 'This is no time for jokes! There must be something we can do to help him! A diversion or something!'

Harry blinked, then nodded. 'I say, what was the name of the man who was turned into a beetle? In Kafka's story, not the one who —'

'What? Gregor something.'

Harry cupped his hands in front of his mouth like a megaphone, and yelled, 'Gregor was a cockroach!'

The Dancing House seemed to hesitate, and the Doctor surged ahead. Sarah shouted, 'He had jaws! He couldn't have been a bug!'

'Good one, old girl,' said Harry admiringly, as the Doctor hurtled onto the bridge and continued running.

* * *

The building followed the Doctor onto the bridge, but the stone arch beneath it cracked under the weight: the towers teetered, then froze into position.

Rychtar appeared beside the Doctor a moment later. ‘Are you all right?

It took us a while to regain control of the nanobots and lock down the system. I hate to think how long it’ll take to repair the damage, even with the back-ups — and we can’t keep the nanobots offline forever, or the city will begin to break down.’

The Doctor looked up at the leaning building, and stepped back. ‘Can you trace the hacker?’

‘We’ve been trying. The signals came from somewhere in the Strahov student centre, but we can’t be any more precise than that.’

‘Can you find out how many students there are named Josef, with a surname beginning with K?’

The android uploaded the answer from the city computer in a fraction of a second. ‘Six,’ he replied.

‘Are any of them studying Kafka?’

‘Four of them are studying literature of the appropriate era,’ he said, as Harry and Sarah came running up to re-join the Doctor.

‘Would any of them have a motive for killing Professor Hrabal or Bedrich Polak?’

Rychtar was silent for several seconds. ‘Possibly. Two applied —

unsuccessfully — to do further studies at the university. The bursar has

the final say on these applications. Two applied for Polak's job. One did

both, but he's studying biology, not literature. But motive isn't considered

evidence: I can't approve a psychoprobe for any of them without more

data.'

'We still need to narrow it down...' the Doctor muttered, and turned to

Harry and Sarah. 'Any ideas?'

They looked at him blankly for a moment. 'Well, he's a terrible

dancer,' said Sarah awkwardly, just to break the silence.

'He is?'

'He's certainly no Fred Astaire,' said Harry. 'He lets the woman lead.'

The Doctor beamed. 'Inspector, I'd like to try an experiment. Can you

please get me a large hall and six attractive young women?'

The six students looked curiously around the ornate ballroom, then

uneasily at the Doctor.

'Gentlemen,' he boomed, 'thank you for coming at such short notice.

I'm looking for a full-time research assistant, who'll need a wide range of

skills: academic aptitude, a strong aesthetic and musical sense, the

ability to express himself or herself physically and to read body

language.' He waved a hand, and six beautiful androids, clad in exquisite

form-fitting gowns, suddenly emerged from the floor. ‘Specifically, ballroom dancing.’

He looked at the students’ expressions: one delighted, three confused, two wary. ‘We’ll be serving the drinks and dinner later, as we promised,’ he continued, ‘but in the meantime, would you take your partners, please? We’re not looking for skill as much as potential.’

Four of the students stepped forwards as the music started, but one of the two who hung back stared at Harry and Sarah, whose clothes must have looked almost as bizarre to his eyes as the Doctor’s cap, scarf — returned to him by Inspector Rychtar — and baggy tweed trousers.

‘Who are they?’ asked Sarah.

‘Experts in twentieth-century dance forms,’ the Doctor replied, matching the two wallflowers’ faces with the holograms in the dossiers: Josef Kohout, the only biologist in the group, and Josef Kriz. If both opted out...

Kriz looked at the disappointed expression on the beautiful faces of the two partnerless androids, sighed, and allowed himself to be led onto the dance floor. Kohout, his expression surly, followed suit a moment later. The Doctor took a step back, and asked Sarah, ‘Are any of them letting the women lead?’

She nodded. ‘Three of them.’

The Doctor’s smile faltered slightly. Harry watched the dancers for

another minute, then asked Sarah, ‘I say, old girl, did you tell me Polak

had been turned into an extinct species of bedbug?’

‘Bedbugs have been extinct for more than a century,’ the Doctor

replied, while Sarah bristled with indignation at being called ‘old girl’.

‘Except in clone zoos, of course...’

‘So who would be most likely to know what one looked like?’

Kohout, dancing nearby, suddenly froze, and stared at Harry in

horror. He released his partner, and ran towards the nearest door. The

android grabbed at him, but he evaded her neatly. Harry ran towards

him, hoping to tackle him, but the other dancers turned the ballroom into

an obstacle course, preventing him from gaining any momentum. Kohout

skidded up to the door and grabbed at the handle — and as he did, the

door turned into Inspector Rychtar, and the handle into a pair of

handcuffs.

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‘Josef Kohout, you are under arrest for the murder of Professor

Hrabal and Bedrich Polak; illegal use of the city computer; and reckless

endangerment,’ said the android, his tone almost gentle. Will you agree

to a psychoprobe?’

Kohout looked as though he were about to resist — but then his

shoulders slumped, and he nodded. Everyone in the room watched as

the student was led away, but the Doctor reached for the microphone. 'Nothing to worry about,' he said cheerfully, and the music swelled up again.

Sarah stared at the now empty doorway. 'What will happen to him, Doctor?'

'He'll be psychoprobed and tried. If he's found guilty, they'll confine him to a virtual reality where he can't harm anyone,' the Time Lord replied. 'They won't let him out until they're sure he's no longer dangerous.'

'How long does that take?' asked Harry.

'It usually takes a year or two, but for someone that young and that angry, it might be decades. Even when he's released, he'll still be under observation, and he might never be sure what's real and what isn't.'

Sarah shuddered. 'That sounds like...'

'Torture?' suggested Harry.

'Something out of Kafka.'

'Maybe,' said the Doctor, 'but it's better than the harrow, or being turned into a bug and stepped on by a skyscraper.' He was silent for a moment as he looked at the ballroom's elaborate decorations. ' *Ars Longa, vita brevis.* Art endures, but life is short.' Suddenly, he grinned and turned to Sarah. 'Shall we dance?'

Spoilsport

Paul Finch

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,

with Jo Grant

The Doctor was standing by the console and tapping his foot to *Coz I Luv You* when Jo came in with two mugs of coffee.

'We must be getting close,' she said. 'This has only just been released. Unless it's a tape?'

'A tape? My dear Jo, I don't collect music on tape. Mind you —' he sipped at the fresh brew appreciatively '— I've a couple of their CDs somewhere.'

'Their what?'

'Compilations: '81 and '97. The Christmas one's on both, needless to say.'

'Doctor, what are you talking about?'

'Never mind.' He smiled. 'This is actually Radio 1, we're picking up.'

'So we're almost home?'

'We'll arrive imminently. Told you I'd get you back in time to meet Mike.'

That was when the shrill single note, something like a dog-whistle, caught Jo in the middle ear. Her vision promptly blurred; she had to clap a hand to the side of her head. Beside her, the console's central pillar,

which had been rising and falling gently for the last ten minutes, began to

falter in its rhythm. The whole TARDIS juddered. Noddy Holder's gravelly

vocals faded into white noise, and the Doctor was suddenly red-faced

with anger.

'Chaloupka!' he snapped. 'Benek Chaloupka!'

When Jo glanced through the TARDIS door, the last thing she expected was a fog-laden vista of sepulchres and leaning, age-mottled tombstones.

She ventured outside. There was complete silence. The only movement came from shifting skeins of spectral mist. Every direction held the same view: lop-sided crucifixes, crumbling mausolea. It was night-time, she felt, but like night-time in a film: the darkness was suggested rather than real. A dim, purplish light revealed every arcane detail. A second passed, then she walked along the path to the nearest monument, a tall, black obelisk with crabbed letters carved on it. They read: 'DVORAK'.

With a dull thump, the TARDIS door closed. Jo turned. The Doctor had emerged, having donned his maroon smoking jacket and a pair of black leather gloves. By the look on his face, he was still vexed. She

knew he deeply resented his inability to pilot the TARDIS, but to have discovered that someone else — someone far less deserving than he,

apparently — was, had been an affront he was barely able to tolerate.

‘We’re obviously back on Earth,’ Jo said. ‘But when? By the looks of

it, it’s the nineteenth century? The eighteenth, maybe?’

The Doctor, having just checked the readings on the console,

corrected her: ‘In actual fact it’s the year 2221. And to be precise, we’re

in Prague.’

‘Prague as in Czechoslovakia?’

‘Prague as in the Third Czech and Slovak Republic. But, yes, it’s the

same place. As a trained agent, Jo, you no doubt possess a great deal of

knowledge concerning this major metropolitan district of the Eastern

Bloc?’

‘Well,’ she began uncertainly, ‘it covers about four hundred square

miles. Its population is one and a half million, I’d guess. Oh, and it’s

currently the residence of the president, Mr Svoboda, who is regarded as

a firm ally of Mr Brezhnev.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That would be accurate for the early 19705, yes.

But things have changed considerably. Communist affiliations are a thing

of the distant past. Prague is now a city in a dome, and this, the once

world- famous Vysehrad Cemetery, where the great and good of her

illustrious past lie buried, is part of a museum called Marvels Less

Mystifying. And if you think that sounds undignified, you don’t know the

half of it!’ He set off at a brisk walking pace. ‘Now if we can just find

our
way up to the head office, there's someone here I'd like to have an extremely heated debate with.'
The cemetery was labyrinthine in layout, so, though they followed path after path, they came always to more eroded headstones, to more decrepit vaults covered in scabrous lichen. Eventually they reached a crossroads, where they halted.
'Loathe as I am to split up,' the Doctor said, 'it would undoubtedly save time if we took different routes and met back here in... say, ten minutes?' Jo glanced uneasily around. 'If we must.'
'Good girl.' The Doctor planted a hand on her shoulder and steered her off down the left-hand path. 'Back here in ten, as we agreed.'
'Yes, but what are we looking for?'
'A way out, of course,' came his reply. He'd already vanished from sight, the route he was following bending out of view.
'A way out,' Jo murmured. 'Why didn't I think of that?'
She set off nervously. At one point the path became narrow, and she had to edge sideways between two rusting iron gates, behind which black stairwells fell to opaque depths. At another, she found herself crossing a square that was literally paved with gravestones. Faded names were visible beneath her feet, and though some were vaguely recognisable — she was sure 'Jan Neruda' and 'Max Svabinsky' were

famous — this didn't compensate for the fact that in many places the

stones had cracked or come apart, or had actually been pushed up as though pressurised from below. Already greasy with moss, it made a dangerous surface to walk on. But these mundane concerns paled to insignificance when Jo passed the entrance to a passage between two neighbouring crypts: at the end of it stood an upright brick sarcophagus, the door to which was slowly opening.

She stopped in her tracks, and made a double take.

Then her hair began to prickle.

Again, it was just like something in a movie. But the door was opening. A low squeal issued from its corroded hinges. Jo tried to tell herself that this was some kind of joke. However, the door was now halfway open and a hand came around it — a twisted hand swathed in leprous-grey bandages. Attached to that hand was an arm in similar condition, and then a shoulder. At last a head appeared, and that was when her blood really ran cold. Whoever this being once was, attempts to mummify it had only partly succeeded, for the bottom jaw had come away completely, leaving a black, festering cavity. Above this, eyes like yellow marbles sunk in hollow pits, gazed between the strips of rotted linen.

Jo had often heard the phrase ‘rooted to the spot’, but had always thought it a metaphor. Now she knew differently. She was rigid, literally frozen with fear.

The thing lurched fully into view. It was the size of a tall man, but gangling and misshapen. Its decayed bindings did little to conceal the emaciated form beneath. Here and there, rib bones were visible, and behind those inner organs, now black and brown like bruised, mouldering fruit...

'That's quite enough of that,' came a clipped voice.

Jo glanced up, startled out of her near-paralysis. The Doctor was perched on the parapet directly above the apparition. He was maybe eight feet up, but now, in that nimble, athletic way of his, swung easily to the ground. The cadaver had turned to face him, but seemed to be regarding him more with surprise than hostility. The Doctor folded his arms and raised an imperious eyebrow. Another moment passed, then the thing reached up, probed gingerly about on the side of its neck, and, a split- second later, dissolved; literally exploded outwards in a cloud of multicoloured dust, which fell to the paving stones and lay there in rainbow patterns.

'Chaloupka,' said the Doctor.

A curious-looking man stood revealed. He was short and stout, and his head was shaved, though he wore a central top-knot, which hung down to his shoulders in a crimson ponytail, and two long, thin moustaches of similar tinge. The overall effect, Jo thought, was faintly barbarous; it made her think of an eastern warrior, like a Hun or Magyar.

But he was grinning amiably, with pudgy, apple-red cheeks, and his clothes — a loose, short- sleeved shirt and silken pantaloons, ballooning out just above his feet, on which he wore a pair of turned-up Persian slippers — spoke of easy relaxation.

‘So you’ve regenerated again, Doctor,’ he said cheerily. ‘I can’t say I like it much. But, tell me, what did you think of my own transformation?’

He brushed a few fragments of colour from his arms, then detached several thin strands of fibre, which connected spider-like beneath his left ear. ‘FX- Gel Powder; the latest thing in stage and movie make-up. As you can see, it’s a hoaxer’s dream.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And on the subject of hoaxers, hucksters and other common criminals, can I assume it was somehow your doing that we were brought here?’

Chaloupka smiled slyly, and produced a small device from his pantaloons pocket. It looked something like a high-tech flute.

‘So,’ the Doctor said, ‘let me guess — during my last visit, you craftily placed a crude mechanism aboard the TARDIS, yes? Some kind of recall device, and this thing activates it?’

‘Sleight of hand, Doctor.’ Chaloupka made to pass it over, only to suddenly present an empty palm, and then to produce the object again,

this time from behind his back. ‘You know that was always my forte.’

‘Well, various forms of martial arts are currently my forte, Chaloupka, and unless you’d like a very instructive demonstration, might I suggest you give me that control right now?’

‘I will, of course, but it won’t work for you.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It’s been bio-personalised.’

‘Bio-personalised?’

Chaloupka shook his head. ‘Clever, eh?’

The Doctor snatched the device, spent several seconds examining its tiny controls.

‘This is impossible!’ he said.

‘Didn’t you once tell me *nothing* was impossible?’ Chaloupka wondered.

The Doctor gazed at the object. ‘Earth expertise, even in the twenty-third century, is insufficiently advanced for you to have utilised such technology.’

‘It’s amazing what a smart man can achieve if he puts his mind to it,’ Chaloupka replied.

The Time Lord eyed him with silent fury.

‘You see,’ Chaloupka added, ‘a simple answer to every mystery.’ And suddenly his expression changed. ‘At least… until now.’

‘Is there something we can help you with, Mr Chaloupka?’ Jo asked, tired of being a spectator to this old feud.

He turned a polite smile on her, and offered a hand. ‘Call me Benek.’

She shook hands, but refused to greet his smile with one of her own.

‘Benek, Mr Chaloupka — the fact is, we were on the way somewhere.’

‘Of course, I’ve been very rude. However, I must assure you that I wouldn’t have hijacked your voyage unless I had a problem with which I genuinely needed assistance.’

‘Then tell us what it is, man,’ the Doctor said impatiently.

Chaloupka cleared his throat. ‘It’s rather embarrassing, I’m afraid.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘You know I’ve spent my entire professional life disproving the supernatural?’

‘I do,’ the Doctor replied.

Chaloupka went on: ‘Marvels Less Mystifying was to be my legacy to the world, my emporium of proof that magic, superstition and the occult are nothing more than confusions born of ignorance, that everything we’ve ever regarded as mystical or paranormal has a perfectly logical explanation grounded in the understanding of science.’

‘I know all about your plans for self-immortalisation, Chaloupka,’ the Doctor interrupted.

‘Well, they’ve been short-lived. My museum has had to close.’

Chaloupka paused dejectedly. ‘My staff refuse to work. Even I am discomforted to be in here.’ Seeing their blank expressions, he added:

‘Must I spell it out? Marvels Less Mystifying, which was created to once

and finally refute the existence of the supernatural… is haunted.’

With off-world emigration now a popular alternative to life in the

greenhouse atmosphere of Earth, Prague, like most great metropolises,

had had to re-adapt itself.

In Prague’s case, of course, it wasn’t just the matter of having to

retain its working population; it also relied on a healthy influx of tourists.

As such, to make their newly domed city as people-friendly as possible,

the governors had opted to carefully reorganise its various attractions, so

that every item of interest or need would occupy its own, sensibly allotted

place, easy to find and invariably in close proximity to other similar items.

The net result was the seven levels on which the city of Prague now

resided. On the topmost level, ‘Administrative’, sat all government

offices, law courts, police departments, embassies and such, while the

sixth level, ‘Commercial’, was reserved for banks, building societies,

insurance companies and other financial institutions. The fifth level was

‘Social & Cultural’: here could be found colleges and schools, theatres,

art galleries, and the like. The fourth was ‘Residential’, which comprised

apartment houses, all constructed in the baroque Germanic style that

had once rendered Prague the most ‘fairy tale’ capital in Europe,

shopping malls and the city's parks, which had real waters drawn up

from the Vltava and then cleansed, flowing through them in a perfectly

natural-seeming river (crossed at its central point by the original Charles

Bridge). Below that was 'Recreational', an extremely lively (some would

say unruly) suburb of the city, composed entirely of restaurants, bars,

nightclubs, casinos, and so on. Next down was 'Antiquarian' — the

ancient heart of Prague, still regarded as vitally important to its economy.

Here could be found all historic monuments and buildings: the Castle, for

example, St Vitus Cathedral, the Daliborka Tower, the Loreta, plus the

entirety of what had once been the Jewish Quarter and the Old Town,

complete with the Old Town Hall and its famous astronomical clock.

'And what's on the bottom level?' Jo asked, fascinated.

They were seated in an 'olde worlde' bar, sipping a strong Czech

beer. At least, Jo was sipping hers; the Doctor had left his untouched.

Chaloupka, who'd proved a genial host despite the Time Lord's ongoing

prickly attitude, had been explaining Prague's recent past to her. Now he

shrugged — rather awkwardly, she thought.

'The bottom level, I'm afraid,' Chaloupka said, 'is what we call Under-

Town. It mainly consists of ruins. The bits we decided we didn't need, the

parts we left behind when we reconstituted the city.'

'And that includes people, Jo,' the Doctor put in. 'The people they didn't need.'

'Doctor!' Chaloupka chided him. 'Every large conurbation has its underclass.'

'Yes, but in most cases they're allowed to mingle freely with the rest.'

'People you didn't need?' Jo asked, shocked.

Chaloupka drained his beaker. 'Recalcitrant elements. Criminals, for example, are sent to live in Under-Town. Also beggars, alcoholics, drug-addicts...'

'It seems very harsh.'

'I'm afraid it's necessary. Attempts to regain control of Earth's climate may not be successful for decades yet. In the meantime, if we want to survive as a thriving municipality, we must do everything we can to make our environment as attractive as possible, and that means ridding ourselves of the old negative aspects of urban living.'

Jo considered this. The narrow streets outside — cobbled and twisting between the thatched, mock-medieval façades of sturdy, pastel-shaded buildings — had been thronging with happy, healthy-looking people. They'd also been unnaturally clean; there'd been no sign of vermin, litter or graffiti. Weather-wise, it had also been pleasant. Even though there were four levels above this one, when Jo had looked skywards she'd seen only a distant blue haze — slightly metallic

perhaps, but not unlike the sky she remembered from her own Earth —

while the temperature inside the great dome was always carefully controlled, ranging from a balmy 24°C in summer to around minus four in

winter. During December and January it apparently even snowed.

'It's an illusion,' the Doctor put in. 'Chaloupka, the vast majority of your countrymen are struggling outside this dome in intolerable

conditions. This new city of yours is a bubble of make-believe existing in

defiance of reality. Rather ironic, considering the numberless similar bubbles that you personally have burst during your career.'

Their host remained resolutely civil. 'First of all, Doctor, this is not my city. I only work and live here. Secondly, every other great capital on Earth is exactly like it — so if there's any blame at all, it needs to be shared.'

'Except,' the Doctor retorted, 'for the fact that I wasn't brought against my will to any of the other capitals.'

'What else was I supposed to do?' the Czech pleaded. 'I'm helpless. Like I said, my museum is haunted. It sounds crazy, but it's the only explanation I can give.'

'How can you be so sure?' Jo asked.

Chaloupka sat back: 'I should tell you a little about myself, Miss Grant. In my early days, I made a living as a stage magician. I'd travel

the colonies performing remarkable feats — magic, mind-reading, fortune telling, and the like. But my particular gimmick, the thing that made me more successful than most, was that I would always conclude my act by giving the game away. Illustrating to my audience that skilled scientific means lay at the heart of the apparent wonders I'd worked. When I held my breath under water for fifty minutes, for example, I'd reveal that I'd taken seal- plasma pills beforehand, to expand the capacity of my lungs. When I read minds, I'd used a pair of Psion orbs...'

'Psion orbs?' Jo said.

'Fist-sized gemstones from the planet Psion Castavares,' the Doctor explained. 'The native population had no speech, so they'd use the stones to transmit telepathic impulses to each other. At the time, Earth prospectors had only just discovered them.'

'Perfect tools for such as I,' Chaloupka added. 'Unfortunately one got broken, which made them useless. But I had other phoney tricks up my sleeve. I was a professional debunker, you see, an arch-spoilsport. And it paid. At length, as a sort of early retirement plan, I settled in Prague — which couldn't have been more perfect, being both my home city and a hotbed of esoteric mystery — and opened Marvels Less Mystifying. It wouldn't just be a showcase for the ingenious methods by which I'd faked my own miracles, but for all those other methods utilised by

"miracle workers" throughout history, and also for the perfectly natural

explanations lying behind the variety of paranormal puzzles that have

long baffled mankind, including — I'm now sorry to say — ghosts.'

He reached to the centre of the table, where a circular glass grid

contained a number of small, differently coloured indentations. He

touched one of these with his forefinger, just long enough for it to read

his fingerprint and authorise a cash transaction, and a moment later a

silver dispenser, in the shape of a carved dragon head, rolled to a halt on

the network of slender rails above, then extended down on a rubberised

hose. Chaloupka held up his beaker, which was promptly filled. He

glanced at the Doctor, who shook his head. Jo was tempted, but didn't

want to get tiddly with business at hand.

Chaloupka shrugged. The dispenser was drawn upwards and away.

'I tell you, Doctor, I've performed all the tests known to science,' he

said, before taking a long pull at the amber brew. 'They're not natural

phenomena; they're not being faked. They are without doubt the spirits of

the dead, and after all my years of mocking them and belittling them, and

confidently assuring the world they don't exist, I'm quite certain that if I

ever set eyes on another one, it will be the end of me!'

Chaloupka refused to accompany them back into the museum. It'd been okay earlier on, he'd said, during daylight, but it was now mid evening and the ghosts would soon walk. He told them this with such earnestness that for a moment Jo wondered if he was acting; he'd been a professional showman, after all. She mentioned this to the Doctor.

'I'm not sure,' the Time Lord replied. 'I know Chaloupka well. Even though he's given to being flippant, I can't believe he'd summon me like this unless it was absolutely necessary.'

'But why should real ghosts suddenly appear here?'

'Well, Prague long had a reputation for being the most haunted city on Earth.'

'But why *here* — I mean, the museum?'

'Why not? If you wanted to teach the enemy a lesson, wouldn't you carry the battle into his very heartland? That's if you believe this stuff, of course. I, as you know, don't.'

Jo was still pondering this when they entered Marvels Less Mystifying, which, in appearance terms at least, was distinctly anachronistic. Where it was actually located, Jo didn't know, but apparently it was an immensely deep structure, spanning the city's five middle levels, though it was only accessible from 'Social & Cultural', 'Recreational' and 'Antiquarian'. The access points, though high-tech —

they were all matter-transmission portals — were contained in small,

street-corner booths which, considering this was the twenty-third century,

looked almost pantomimic. They were made from dark corrugated metal,

and fixed over each one was a black hoarding painted with Gothic

crimson letters:

MARVELS LESS MYSTIFYING

Taking the Super out of Natural

The theme continued inside. The museum lobby was filled with green

and purple light, with dry-ice floating at knee level. Here and there on

plinths, stood wax figurines of famous figures who'd once been the

centre of paranormal research: Nostradamus, Count St Germain,

Bigfoot, the Mothman, and, of course, Prague's own legendary Golem.

Jo felt she could easily have been at Ripley's Odditorium in 1970s

Blackpool.

The check-in desk was unmanned, but Chaloupka had left a wrist-

radio on it for them, alongside an official direction finder. This latter was

like a book of ancient lore, its leather binding artistically frayed, but when

opened, a three-dimensional hologram of the museum's interior sprang

up, a tiny red pip indicating their specific location. It led them up a grand

stairway hung to either side with ragged, dust-laden drapes, and to a

narrow, coffin-shaped door, on the other side of which they traversed a

dark passage filled with dripping water and the fluttering of bats. Finally,

they emerged from the sarcophagus from which Chaloupka had made

his grand entrance earlier.

Thanks to the direction finder, they were this time able to work their

way through the Vysehrad necropolis, eventually coming to a tall edifice

of decayed brick, at the base of which a monstrous face sat with its

mouth wide open. They entered via the mouth, and ascended a spiral

stair.

'Under normal circumstances,' the Doctor said, 'Chaloupka would

doubtless have actors flitting about down there in FX-Gel Powder.'

'I thought the idea of this place was to prove that ghosts *don't* exist?'

Jo replied.

'It is. That was just the intro: something to soften visitors up and show

them how easily they can be frightened by something that's actually quite

mundane.'

At the top, a door slid open and admitted them to the exhibition

proper. The first zone represented a music hall. Jo and the Doctor

walked down a central aisle, to the accompaniment of ooohs and aaahs

from an unseen audience, to a circular stage on which an animatronic

magician in the usual regalia — evening dress, a red silk cape, white

gloves — but with his head an expressionless black sphere, performed

all the classic illusions. They were able to walk entirely around the stage,

viewing the magician from every angle, and one by one his secrets were

revealed: hidden panels, retractable blades, and such.

After this, they took a boat trip: a small rowboat cut silently across the

placid surface of a virtual ocean. Here and there, curious objects would

break the rippling surface — the diamond-shaped fins and long necks of

what looked like plesiosaurs. Then, every so often, the boat would sink

into the glinting blue void below, where holograms of whales, squids and

other known denizens of the deep could be identified as the real culprits.

In one case there was even a swimming elephant, the upper portions of

whose head and snorkelling trunk created an archetypical surface profile

of a sea serpent; a smooth voice intoned that this had once happened off

the coast of Sri Lanka and that a celebrated photograph had resulted.

Off the boat, they passed through another door, and found

themselves in Edwardian Britain: a succession of ornate drawing rooms,

complete with rugs, divans and crackling hearths, though skilled lighting

had rendered everything, even the Doctor and Jo, black and white. They

were now in the world of the seance, and once again, fraudulence was

exposed through a variety of animated figures. In one case, a small

bearded man in tweeds and pince-nez was seen to levitate — though

closer examination revealed fibre-thin wires and a pulley system

concealed above the chandelier. A grand lady would lift her voluminous

skirts at the moment of spiritual contact, and a small child creep out, rap

the table, and then run around the darkened room on naked, pattering

feet.

They moved down a wood-panelled passage, along which an old-

fashioned array of photographs and word cards illustrated how other

famous anomalies were actually quite explainable. Jo had never known,

for instance, that the crew of the *Mary Celeste* had only numbered ten.

She'd always imagined that hundreds of people had inexplicably

vanished from the ill-fated vessel; a mere handful was far less

bewildering in an age when piracy and mutiny were problems. Likewise,

a list of disappearances in the so-called 'Magellan Triangle', during the

twenty-second century, were shown to have coincided with short-lived

tropical storms brought on by global warming. She was just about to

comment on this, when they heard a voice.

At least, it sounded like a voice.

It was low, keening, agonised.

They turned and stared along the passage.

The figure of a girl was coming slowly towards them. When she got closer, they saw that she was ragged and emaciated. When she got really close, they saw that her face had been severely battered.

The breath caught in Jo's throat. Even the Doctor looked stunned.

The girl limped straight towards them. The front of her dress was dotted with gore; one eye was purple and swollen to the size of a plum.

Jo clapped a hand to her mouth. The Doctor reached towards the girl, who surely was about to topple into his arms. Instead, however, she began to fade. First she lost her colour, then she became transparent, then she was gone. There wasn't a wisp of mist, nor a blob of ectoplasm.

The Doctor spun around and stared behind them.

The passage was completely empty.

'No,' the Doctor said, checking the area with his sonic screwdriver. 'There's no energy source detectable, at least nothing abnormal.'

'Another hologram?' Jo suggested.

'If it was, there'd be a source unit somewhere round here, and I'd be picking it up.'

'It was certainly ghost-like.' Even after everything Jo had so far seen, that incident had left her shaken. The look on the spectral girl's face had

been quite indescribable. 'You don't think it really was a ghost?'

‘Jo, there are no such things as ghosts.’

They proceeded warily, and at the next junction were confronted by an old woman in a dirty shawl, sitting cross-legged. She appeared to be counting bones. Suddenly aware of them, she glanced up, grimaced ghoulishly and then vanished.

The Doctor again analysed the spot with his sonic screwdriver. The result was still negative. Then something breezed past close behind them. They whirled around. Down an adjacent passage, maybe 15 yards away, stood a teenage boy with what looked like a horrible birth defect; a head so bulbous and distorted that his eyes were on different levels and his mouth hanging open at a skewed angle. In the blink of an eye, he’d then moved five yards closer. The next they knew, he was directly in front of them.

Jo backed away. The Doctor wafted at the ghastly figure, but his arm passed clean through it. Drool now began to fall down the abomination’s chin. Up close, its teeth were rotting pegs in a cancerous maw.

It lunged.

Jo lurched backwards again, dropping the direction finder, which burst apart in a shower of blue sparks.

And as before, the horror vanished; just winked out of sight. ‘Doctor,’ Jo finally stammered. ‘I think these *are* real.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘But you saw that thing!’

‘Jo!’ For a moment he sounded cross, but then he noticed how pale she looked, and his tone softened. ‘We’ve only just come back from Peladon. Last year we were in Devil’s End. In both cases, you saw for yourself how easily unknown phenomena can be mistaken for the supernatural. Am I right?’

She nodded, but didn’t look terribly convinced.

He considered. It was understandable that she was getting alarmed. The place was filled with psychological triggers; it was *designed* to stir those age-old fears.

‘Let’s go back to the TARDIS.’ He pocketed his screwdriver. ‘I’ve got more sensitive equipment that’ll help us get to the bottom of this.’

It wasn’t difficult retracing their path, though it quickly became apparent that without the direction-finding device, they’d have trouble navigating in other parts of the museum.

The Doctor spoke into the wrist-radio: ‘Chaloupka, you receiving, over?’

‘Ah, Doctor,’ came the response. ‘How is it?’

‘I’m afraid the direction finder’s gone west. We need to get hold of another one if we want to make any progress.’

There was a pause, then Chaloupka replied: ‘Everything valuable like that’s now locked in the security safe in my office. There’s an express lift

to it at the left-hand side of the lobby. If you're going to go up, you'll need

the combination. But, listen... I know exactly what's in there, just in case

you or Miss Grant feel a tad light-fingered.'

The Doctor exploded: 'Now look here, Chaloupka!'

'Only a joke, only a joke. As if I'd let you in there at all, had I any

suspicions. You ready for the numbers?'

Jo produced a pad and pencil, and a few moments later, with the

combination to hand, they descended back to the lobby. Once again, the

'funhouse' atmosphere pervaded, though this time Jo barely noticed it.

She'd already insisted that she should be the one to go up to

Chaloupka's office, while the Doctor went and collected the extra kit he

needed.

'You think you can handle it?' he asked, surprised.

She nodded but said nothing.

'Remember, Jo, these are phantasms, nothing more. Even if by some

unknown quirk of physics, they actually do represent tortured souls, they

can't hurt you.'

He could have chosen his words better. The phrase 'tortured souls'

hadn't exactly brought a smile to Jo's face as the lift door slid closed on

her.

Represent tortured souls...

He'd only said it to illustrate his point, but now — suddenly — he began to wonder if it might have some significance. The more he pondered it, the more an idea took root. He spoke urgently into the wrist-radio. 'Chaloupka?'

'Go ahead, Doctor.'

'You must have back rooms in here, storage areas, that sort of thing?'

'There's a basement level. It's pretty dingy, mind. Not much to see.'

'I've seen enough already,' the Doctor replied. 'Sit tight. I think your problem's about to be solved.'

Jo tried to ignore the terrible screams she heard as she slowly ascended, though she had to put her hands on her ears. There was no mistaking the difference between theatrical screams and *real* screams. When the capsule finally halted, the noises had come to an end, but Jo was as tense as she'd ever been in her life. The door opened and she forced herself to step through it. She'd deliberately come up here alone, not just to prove something to the Doctor, but to herself. Of course, she felt this way every time something frightened her: but she was particularly resolved to confirm her courage on this occasion. As the Doctor had said, ghosts, no matter how hideous to look at, could not cause you harm.

She started forwards. This was evidently the museum's admin level, because it was bare and functional. She passed open doors to empty

offices, which despite being done out in white vinyl and containing only

the most futuristic equipment, looked as drab and unprepossessing as

every office she'd ever been in.

Then something crossed the passage behind her.

Jo spun around.

Nothing.

She wandered back to the first pair of opposing doorways, and

glanced through both. Again nothing: deserted office space.

She turned and pressed on. Directly ahead, a double-sized entrance

led into what looked like a much larger office, doubtless Chaloupka's.

She felt at her jacket pocket. The notepad was there, containing the

combination numbers. Jo's confidence grew; in a few moments she'd be

on her way back. She glanced over her shoulder again... and froze.

Something had appeared in the doorway to one of the offices she'd

just checked and found empty. It was a black dog, a great red-eyed

brute, its thick ruff bristling as it snarled at her. One side of its face was

horrifically scarred, its eyes burned like hot coals and diseased foam

hung in ribbons from its exposed fangs.

It bounded forwards.

The museum basement, which the Doctor accessed via a steel

service stair, was a vast, cement-floored area, poorly lit and fetid with

the

stench of dust and damp. Pipes and cables criss-crossed it overhead,

festooned with cobwebs, while stacks of crates and rows of cabinets

turned the central part of it into a labyrinth of narrow passageways.

Studiously ignoring the occasional apparition that swirled past him,

the Time Lord advanced through it. He'd dashed down here without

going back up to get anything else from the TARDIS, but the only thing

he needed to locate now was a strong heat source, and, thanks to his

sonic screwdriver, he found that quickly — at the far side of the room,

where old- fashioned net-wiring fenced off a small utilities area. Among

the many mechanisms at work inside this, several of which looked

surprisingly archaic — Chaloupka had always cut expenses where he

could, the Doctor remembered — a huge copper cistern stood gurgling to

itself. It was about ten-feet tall and partly enclosed in an alcove. Various

pipes branched away from its top section, no doubt pumping hot water

up into the main body of the museum. The heat it gave off was intense.

The Doctor smiled. Then something distracted him. Close to his left,

the door to a tall, metal locker had creaked open, and a boy of eight or

nine was standing there. He was thin and dirty, and wore clothes several

sizes too small. He was also armed with a knife; his expression was

feral.

The Doctor turned away. He no longer had time for ghosts.

And the boy attacked.

To the Time Lord's amazement, the blade struck him just under his

left elbow, slashing the sleeve of his smoking jacket wide open.

Jo raced into Chaloupka's office, hitting the door-control button. It slid

closed. She backed across the room, vaguely aware that it contained a

large desk laden with computers and scattered with disks and

paperwork. It wasn't exactly the corporate HQ she'd been expecting, but

for the moment all she could think about was the terror on the other side

of the door. Even now she could hear it snuffling, growling.

She retreated as far as the desk, then turned to see if there was

another way out. The rear wall of the office was one entire window, a

vast glazed panel beyond which a milky mist swirled. Jo wasn't sure

what this signified: reality or a fake image? In normal circumstances

would something else be projected there — perhaps a high view of

Prague as it once had been? There was another snarl from the door. Jo

glanced back. Had it come through yet? *Could* it come through? She

pulled off her jacket and wrapped it round her arm; if the beast did attack,

maybe she could fend it off? Which was a ridiculous notion, of course:

even if this thing was a ghost, it couldn't harm her. The Doctor had assured her of that.

But it had looked so chillingly and malevolently real.

She again stared around, and through an arched doorway in the right-hand wall, now saw what looked like a boardroom. Tubular metal chairs were arranged around a long, glass-topped table. This room too was surrounded by glazed panels through which milk-white vagueness was visible, so when she suddenly realised that somebody was in there, she at first only saw him as a silhouette. Slowly, however, he rose up from his position at the head of the table, and advanced down alongside it towards the door. Once again Jo's skin began to creep — she'd just noticed that whoever this man was, he wasn't actually walking. When he reached the doorway, she saw that his feet didn't even touch the floor, which was quite appropriate, because now that she could see him properly, he looked for all the world like someone who'd recently been hanged.

He was cadaverously thin and possessed of a ghastly pallor. His head was crooked to one side and he wore a single, colourless garment, a shift extending from his neck to his knees. His eyes were dead-white orbs, but he wasn't completely deceased: his grey lips now drew back in a fiendish, sickle-shaped grin, revealing clamped teeth that were pointed

and bloody.

The terrified girl scrambled backwards across the desk. Two

computer terminals went crashing to the floor. She ignored them. On the

other side of the desk was the window; that immense window that led

only to emptiness.

But even emptiness was preferable to this.

She grabbed up Chaloupka's chair and swung it as hard as she could

at the glass. It bounced back. She swung it again; the same thing

happened. She then glanced left, to find that the hanged man had come

right up to her.

His grinning face was inches from her own.

The boy lunged twice more with his blade, but they were clumsy

blows and each time the Doctor was able to evade them. At last the Time

Lord put in a blocking move, catching the boy's right forearm with his left,

and then striking down with a karate chop. The boy's hand spasmed

open, and the knife clattered to the floor. The boy backed off, staring

goggle- eyed, before haring away down the nearest passage.

The Doctor turned to face the cabinet from which his assailant had

emerged. It was possible that the child routinely took knives to people,

but more likely he'd been protecting something.

‘They can’t hurt you, Jo,’ she heard the Doctor reassure her. ‘They’re not real.’

But Jo was now far beyond any such rational assessment.

Though her eyes were tight closed, her face averted, she knew the ghastly visage was right beside her; the eyes — those awful sightless eyes — boring into hers, that vile mouth only centimetres from her lips, that grin broadening, those sharpened teeth parting as though to kiss her...

She broke from her paralysis. She was already flat against the window, and now flailed out her hand for anything she could use in self-defence. By pure fortune, she struck a button control. There was a purring sound, and she felt the glass panel behind her slide away. A warm, moist air blew in. Jo could suddenly sense a perilous drop. For all she knew, this might be the exterior of the dome itself, and the fall could be thousands of feet.

Even so, she retreated another step. Despite the soles of her boots, she felt the lush carpet give way to slippery metal. The window ledge? It didn’t matter. Any kind of escape was better than none.

And then, abruptly, the horror wasn’t there any more.

Again, Jo didn’t see this — she felt it.

Her eyes blinked open.

The office was empty.

She glanced left: the boardroom was also empty.

A moment passed, and then she stumbled forwards and fell onto Chaloupka's desk, where she stayed for several seconds as her mingled sweat and tears dripped onto its polished mahogany surface. Only after a full minute did she dare look up again. The office was still empty, and now the door stood open on the passage where the dog had been lurking, and that too was clear.

And on this occasion, she felt, it was really clear.

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She couldn't say why, but suddenly Jo knew that the ghostly visitants hadn't just slipped out of sight waiting for their next moment of mischief.

They were genuinely gone.

The ragged young girl stirred in her sleep.

The Doctor gazed down at her. She lay curled on a pile of gaudy old costumes. When she finally opened her eyes and saw the Time Lord, she gave a gasp of fright, leapt up and bolted past him, scampering away down the same passage her young comrade had taken.

The Doctor glanced again around the cabinet's interior. To the left of where the girl had been lying, several more costumes hung in their dusty finery. One looked as though it should belong to an Arabian prince,

another to Merlin. Underneath them, there was an open box containing a

jumble of old props: a top hat, a wand, a pair of divining rods, a spillage

of tarot cards, and in the middle of it all, smashed to splinters — green,

shimmering splinters, but splinters nonetheless — was the Psion orb the

Doctor had just stamped his foot on.

'So how did they get in?' Jo asked, as they strolled back to the

TARDIS. The Doctor shrugged. 'How do mice get into any building? But

it struck me straight away that Chaloupka's basement abutted onto

Under-Town. It was a matter of *when*, rather than if, some of its

occupants would find their way in here looking for a warm, dry bed.'

'But don't you need *two* Psion orbs for them to actually work?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Psion orbs have a crystalline inner

structure that amplifies electronic impulses emanating from the parietal

cortex. That's the portion of the left hemisphere of your brain where

visual thoughts are processed into words. Virtually no one knew about

them on Earth when Chaloupka first got hold of his. I remember

members of his audience being flabbergasted at some of the information

he'd dig up from their past, unaware that one orb was concealed in the

back of their seat and the other in his jacket pocket. In that respect, for a

controlled telepathic link, you *do* require two, but one on its own will still

capture bits of information and throw them out — rather like a transmitter

without a receiver.'

'So the ghosts were just images from those street children's dreams?'

'Or their daily recollections,' the Doctor said. 'Disturbing thought, eh?'

'At least Chaloupka's happy,' Jo finally remarked.

'No great consolation, I assure you.'

'He gave you the remote control for the TARDIS.'

'No use to me, Jo. I doubt I'd have the skill to bio-personalise it to me

even if the Time Lords restored my knowledge. The main advantage is

that he can't use it any more. Not that I think he would. He's got what he

wants.'

'To be fair, we can't blame him,' she replied. 'It's his livelihood.'

'My dear girl,' the Doctor chuckled. 'I think you were closer to the

mark in your earlier assessment. The Benek Chaloupka I knew could

have solved this problem immediately. No, I think you'll find our presence

here served him mainly as a publicity coup.'

Jo pondered this. When they'd finally re-emerged from the museum,

they'd found Chaloupka in the same bar where they'd left him earlier, but

now with one or two others, whom he'd introduced as 'friends from the

media'. Now that the Doctor mentioned it, the atmosphere in there had

been one of a press conference rather than an informal meeting.

'He conned us!' she said.

'Very smartly. Mind, I'm still surprised by that. I'm not entirely sure

why he needed to. Maybe business isn't so brisk these days.'

'Maybe the truth-over-lie stuff was getting a bit old hat?'

'That wouldn't surprise me,' the Doctor said. 'It's hardly the way the

people of Prague lead their lives these days.'

Jo knew what he meant. As the Doctor opened the TARDIS and

vanished inside, she glanced sideways, focusing briefly on a broken-

open sepulchre — and on the abyssal darkness lying deep below it.

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War in a Time of Peace

Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor,

with Charley Pollard

The world was dead.

Charley had expected bright lights, crowds of people, music and

laughter. That was how she had pictured Christmas in Prague and that,

after all, was what the Doctor had promised her.

But there were no people, and the world was utterly silent.

It was dark too. The only light came from the TARDIS's open doorway

where Charley stood, wondering what on earth had gone wrong. Looking

up, she could see no stars, only a vast blackness. No clouds, just...

nothing.

It felt cold enough to snow, yet there was no snow on the ground.

Neither was there the merest hint of a breeze. The air, while cold enough

to hurt Charley's lungs, felt somehow stale, as though it had gathered

dust.

Had the Doctor got his dates wrong? Possibly. Even so, this felt

wrong. Uneasy, Charley went back inside. 'It might be Prague,' she said.

'But I don't think it's Christmas.'

The Doctor, fussing around the TARDIS console, didn't look up. 'Yes,

it is. Well, Christmas Eve, to be precise.'

'Something isn't right.'

'I'm perfectly aware something isn't right. Why else do you think I'm

doing this?'

Charley, watching as the Doctor's hands flew over switches and dials,

pushing here, turning there, had no idea what this was. But she didn't

ask. She'd spent enough time with him to know there was no point. Any

answer, should he be inclined to give one, would probably be far beyond

her understanding.

'Nothing,' he muttered, pausing to stare up at a blank screen.

'Nothing coming through.'

‘Can you fix it?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It’s not a case of fixing anything.’

‘But we hit something,’ Charley said. In the seconds before landing, the TARDIS had lurched violently, almost throwing her off her feet.

‘Everything is *working* perfectly well. But if we are *where* we are supposed to be, when we are supposed to be there, we should be picking up broadcasts from all over the world. Instead we get... well, you can see for yourself.’

Charley’s eyes were drawn to the screen. It was as dead as the world outside.

She shivered, and then looked round sharply as a sound like a gunshot shattered the silence.

‘Doctor!’

‘I heard it,’ he said, moving quickly towards the door.

Charley stood in his way. ‘Someone’s shooting. And you just can’t wait to go and investigate.’

The Doctor grinned, put his hands on her shoulders and gently moved her aside. ‘Don’t worry about me. I’ll be perfectly fine. I always am.’ They could hear shouting now, the words made indistinct by distance, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

‘But you might get shot!’

‘I’ve been shot before,’ the Doctor said cheerily. ‘And I’m still here,

aren't I? Come on!'

With that he stepped outside, the darkness swallowing him as he moved beyond the light.

Pausing only long enough to pull the TARDIS door shut, Charley hurried after him, into the unnatural night. She quickly realised not all the street lights were out but there were so few left undamaged they barely made an impression on the inky blackness surrounding them. Still, she could just about make out the Doctor ahead of her, long coat streaming behind him as he strode towards the source of the clamour, which grew in intensity with every step he took.

'Doctor!' Charley called. 'Wait for me!'

Her voice echoed, too loud for comfort. There was danger ahead and Charley did not want to attract any unnecessary attention. The Doctor must have heard her, but did not slow down. Typical, she thought with a touch of annoyance. Once he got an idea in his head, there was no stopping him.

Her eyes became accustomed to the poor light and she began to see buildings around them. They were in a narrow street, shops on one side, a terrace of old houses on the other. Most of them had been boarded up.

The rest bore the scars of violence; broken windows, or doors hanging loose from broken hinges.

The Doctor turned a corner and disappeared.

Charley groaned, feeling strangely out of breath. There was definitely something wrong with the air, she thought as she reluctantly followed him. The sounds of shouting were much louder in the vastness of the large open square she found herself in. On the far side of the square a car stood with its headlamps on. Blue lights turned on its roof, giving the square an eerie glow.

‘Doctor!’ she gasped when she caught up with him.

‘What?’ He looked down at her in surprise. ‘I thought I told you to stay with the TARDIS.’

‘No, you didn’t. You just marched off without waiting. Slow down before we end up being shot at!’

The look he gave was half-smiling, half-quizzical, as though she had just said something completely insane. ‘Stop fretting, Charley. We’re not in any danger, not with the police to look after us.’

Charley looked. Now she could see five or six people, standing in front of a large broken window. They were outside what appeared to be a department store. Separated from them by a few yards, a solitary figure was shouting.

‘Disperse now or you will be arrested.’

The Doctor slowed and stopped, raising a hand for Charley to do the same.

'The military are on their way. If you are here when they arrive you will be arrested.'

It was a woman, Charley realised, a lone police officer fending off a gang of looters.

What had happened here? She'd studied pictures of Prague, had marvelled at its bridges, its red-roofed buildings, its stately cathedrals and halls. To set foot on its ancient streets had long been a dream of hers. And now, here she was. But this was no dream. It was a nightmare.

Not far away, a siren sounded.

As though aware they had lost this particular battle, the looters quickly dispersed. Running away in different directions they were lost in the shadows. Charley realised she had been holding her breath and let it out in a long, grateful sigh.

'See?' the Doctor said. 'Told you there was nothing to worry about.'

Before Charley could answer he was on his way again, heading for the policewoman. She obviously heard him approach because she spun around to face him, gun levelled. 'That's close enough.'

The Doctor raised both his hands, but kept on walking. 'It's all right. I'm not interested in looting.'

'Who's that with you?' the policewoman demanded.

Charley went cold when she saw the gun was now pointing at her.

‘That’s my friend. Charlotte. But most people call her Charley.’

‘And you? Who are you?’

‘Most people call me the Doctor.’ His tone, as ever, was calm and friendly. Charley knew he was capable of charming the birds from the trees. She only hoped the same charm would work on an armed police officer.

‘Both of you step forward. Keep your hands where I can see them.’

Charley followed the Doctor’s lead and raised her hands. Then she walked towards the officer, heart thudding in her chest, praying the woman’s nerve was strong enough not to pull the trigger accidentally.

‘Now, one at a time, take out your identification. Slowly.’

The Doctor pulled a face. ‘Ah, now, there’s the problem. We don’t —’

He suddenly lunged forward, hitting the officer’s gun out of the way and

charging into her with his shoulder, knocking her over. A shot rang out,

followed swiftly by another. Charley screamed and threw herself to the

ground as a bullet ricocheted off one of the walls behind her. As if in slow

motion she saw a man run out of the department store, dragging a heavy

bag with one hand and waving a gun towards them with the other.

The policewoman pushed herself to her knees, raised her arm and

fired.

The man yelled once and clutched his shoulder. He let go of the bag and staggered away.

The policewoman walked to Charley, gun held loosely at her side.

‘Are you hurt?’

Charley shook her head. ‘Just shaken. I’m not used to people shooting at me.’

‘He wasn’t shooting at you. He was shooting at me.’ She looked at the Doctor. ‘And he would have hit me too, in the back, if you hadn’t pushed me out of the way. Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it, officer...?’

‘Hingis,’ the woman said, giving them a quick smile. She was, Charley could see, a bag of nerves. ‘Ilona Hingis.’

The Doctor studied her with concern. ‘You look white, Ilona. Not going to faint on us, are you?’

‘I’ll be all right,’ the policewoman answered, putting the gun into the holster on her belt. Her hand, Charley noticed, was trembling, so that it took her several attempts to slide the weapon home. ‘You’re not used to being shot at and I’m not used to shooting people. It’s not an experience I’d want to repeat in a hurry.’

‘What’s going on?’ Charley asked. ‘Why is everything so dark?’

Ilona shrugged. ‘The containment field, of course. Nothing gets out,

nothing gets in. Not even sunlight. Surely you must know that.'

'This may sound like a stupid question,' the Doctor said. 'But what containment field?'

'Is this your idea of a joke?'

'Humour me, please. I *did* save your life, after all!'

There he goes again, Charley thought admiringly. Charm guns on full-blast.

It worked too.

'It's this damned war. All our major population centres are being shielded in case of missile attack. The field went up nearly a week ago.

It's like being stuck inside a bottle.'

Charley wrinkled her nose. 'That explains the air.'

'No, it doesn't explain anything.' The Doctor looked up, as if hoping to gain inspiration from the heavens, even if the heavens were obscured. 'There was no *war*. Not at this time. This was a time of expansion and prosperity, not hostility!'

Ilona gave the Doctor the kind of 'are you mad?' look he had given Charley earlier. 'Try telling that to the troops. Try telling that to those left

behind to suffer.'

'Is that why you didn't shoot to kill that looter?' the Doctor asked. His voice was soft, filled with compassion. 'Even though he would have shot

you in the back?'

For a moment Ilona only glared at him. Then she looked away. 'I

didn't mean to hit him at all. I told you I wasn't used to firing a gun. I only

wanted to frighten him off. I guess I managed that all right.' And with that

she gave a bitter laugh. 'There was meant to be an evacuation

programme. But something went wrong. We're all trapped here. I have

my job to do. I must stop the looting. But... people have to live.'

The sirens grew closer until they were so loud that Charley had to put

her hands over her ears. Headlights swept over them as a covered truck

raced into the square and screeched to a halt. Around a dozen soldiers

emerged from the back, rifles at the ready. Charley was very careful not

to move.

The soldiers parted to allow through a grey-haired officer of obviously

senior rank. 'What's going on here?'

Ilona stepped forward, identification badge in her hand. 'There was a

public order incident, but I have matters under control.'

The officer glared at the department store. Disgust filled his voice.

'Looters.'

'Looters,' Ilona agreed.

The officer's hard stare now took in the Doctor and Charley. 'These

are the suspects?'

'No. They assisted me. I owe this man my life.'

‘I see.’ The officer stepped up to the Doctor, who smiled at him.

‘Name?’

‘My friends call me the Doctor.’

The smile was not returned. ‘Papers?’

The Doctor made a great show of patting his pockets. ‘Now there’s

the thing. I knew I had them on me when I went out. But I seem to have

misplaced them.’

The officer nodded at the soldiers. ‘Take them away.’

Wait!’ Ilona started. ‘This is a simple police matter. I see no reason

why the military needs to become involved.’

The officer raised a hand, silencing her. ‘Colonel Rijzki’s orders,

officer, are to arrest anyone without papers. This is a time of war,

remember?’

‘But these people have done nothing wrong!’

The officer looked at the soldiers and suddenly their rifles were raised

and pointing directly at the Doctor and Charley.

‘This is a military concern. They could be spies.’

‘Spies!’ Charley couldn’t help herself, not even with a dozen rifles

aimed at her. ‘That’s crazy!’

‘Perhaps. We will find out, one way or another.’

He turned and climbed into the front of the truck.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ilona said. ‘There is nothing more I can do for you.’

Charley and the Doctor were herded into the back of the vehicle at gunpoint, and then pushed down onto one of the wooden benches running along each side. Soldiers crammed in alongside them, rifles held between their knees. Seconds later the truck rumbled into life and set off.

Charley looked helplessly at the Doctor. He winked in return but she could see from his face that he was troubled.

'Where are you taking us?' she demanded of the soldiers. One of them immediately shushed her.

There was nothing for it but to wait. They were bounced from side to side, the truck lurching so violently that Charley was nearly thrown from the bench. Nobody moved to help her. The soldiers either stared at the floor or glared at her and the Doctor with open contempt.

Finally they arrived. The two of them were led outside. Before they had time to properly look around the soldiers were ushering them up wide stone steps leading to some kind of official building. They passed through double doors, flanked on each side by a heavily armed soldier, emerging onto a long, brightly lit corridor. It was windowless, its walls painted a functional green. Apart from a slight vibration in the air, like the thrumming of a distant engine, it was silent.

Most of the soldiers peeled off and marched down a corridor. Two remained, along with the grey-haired officer, to escort the Doctor and

Charley. They passed no one. Perhaps, Charley thought, it was the middle of the night. Or perhaps the place was so secret only spies and interrogators were brought there.

The thought made her shudder.

She looked at the Doctor for reassurance but he was staring resolutely ahead, forehead creased as though he were concentrating intensely. Hopefully that meant he was coming up with a plan for getting them out of this mess.

The soldiers halted when they reached a metal door. The commander took out an ID card and held it up to a small black box inset into the corridor wall. The door slid open. ‘Inside,’ he ordered. ‘Someone will be along to deal with you shortly.’

Charley felt her legs go weak as the door closed behind them and the key turned the lock shut.

‘Doctor! What on earth are we going to do?’

‘Nothing we can do for now. I’m sure someone will show up before long, though. Might as well make ourselves comfortable in the meantime.’

Comfort, Charlie thought dubiously, was not something their cell readily offered. It was more like an office than a cell, even if its sole window was barred. Apart from a desk and two chairs, one on each side, it was bare.

The Doctor dragged one of the seats back and sat on it, frowning.

Seconds later he put his feet up on the desk and stretched.

‘Care to join me?’ He indicated the other seat. ‘Basic but not uncomfortable.’

Charley pulled a face. The Doctor had never let her down. But this time was different. Heavily outnumbered by armed soldiers, in a city apparently at war, with nothing — not even sunlight — getting in. Which meant nothing could get out. Even if she and the Doctor could run, they would not run very far.

The Doctor suddenly pushed himself up from the chair and began pacing the room. ‘This is ridiculous! There was no war in Europe.’ His face creased into a frown. ‘I *do* have a very vague recollection of something happening in Prague —’

‘What do you mean, *some* thing?’ Charley blurted. ‘Can’t you be a little more precise?’

The Doctor rolled his eyes. ‘I can’t remember *every* single thing that has happened on your planet.’

‘And there was me thinking you were perfect. Do you even know what year this is?’

‘Twenty-sixty-four,’ the Doctor said, ignoring the jibe. ‘The age of the super states.’

‘Super states?’

‘Yes. Many of the countries you know are gone. Europe, for example, is now one big unified state. Same with the Latin American countries and much of Africa. A few different Asian states, though Japan remained independent. Anyway, their combined strengths brought about a new era of stability. This is supposed to be a time of prosperity, the prelude to mankind’s great push to the stars. No war, though. There hasn’t been a war for years.’

Charley looked across to the darkness beyond the window. ‘Then how do you explain all this?’

Before the Doctor could answer, a key turned in the lock and the door swung open.

A tall, wiry man in uniform strode in. Two soldiers followed him.

‘Wait outside,’ he said. They stepped neatly back into the corridor, one of them closing the door.

The man studied them intently for a moment. He seemed particularly intrigued by the Doctor. ‘Colonel Rijzki,’ he announced. ‘Head of Prague military forces.’

‘Are we so important that we get a visit from the top man?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Your importance rather depends on how willing you both are to cooperate.’

His voice was calm, friendly almost, but Charley wasn’t fooled. She had met his type before.

‘I understand you have no papers. That is unfortunate.’

‘We’re not from here,’ said the Doctor. ‘We are… travellers.’

‘Even travellers need papers, Doctor. Oh, don’t look so surprised. You think I was not briefed? Yes, the Doctor and his friend, the girl with a boy’s name, wandering the city, without identification.’

‘We weren’t doing any harm,’ Charley said. ‘Actually, we saved that policewoman’s life.’

The colonel nodded. ‘So I gather. That proves nothing. Unless you can convince me otherwise, you must be regarded as spies. We are at war, Doctor. We cannot afford the luxury of goodwill to strangers.’

‘But there is no war!’ the Doctor insisted, raising his voice. ‘Something is very wrong here. Without the shield you could find that out for yourself!’

‘Ah, I see.’ The colonel smiled coldly. ‘You want me to shut off the containment field? I could, you know. It would take but a matter of moments.’

‘So do it!’ Charley said.

‘And then what would happen? Would I discover that this war was somehow just a misunderstanding, a silly mistake of some kind? Or perhaps,’ he added, the smile vanishing, ‘I would discover the enemy right outside the shield, waiting for it to come down, so they could simply march in. Isn’t *that* what I would discover?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘What is the alternative? To keep the field up until the city tears itself apart?’

‘This is *my* city, Doctor, not yours. It will not tear itself apart while I remain in charge.’

‘The looting —’ Charley began.

‘We have the looting under control. What you witnessed was an isolated incident.’

‘But people will starve without fresh supplies coming in. And what about disease? How long do you think it will be before people start getting sick?’

‘Don’t lecture me,’ Rijzki fired back at her. ‘You sound as if I am doing this to punish my people, not to help them. At least here they are protected. They have a chance of survival. Do you think they would survive the war outside?’

Charley wanted to scream.

‘Why won’t you at least give the Doctor a chance to prove what he’s saying is true. He’s forgotten more than you’ll ever know.’

‘I am a busy man,’ Rijzki said dismissively, turning his back and rapping on the door. Just before it opened he turned to face the two of them again. ‘This conversation is not over. But next time it will not be as

friendly.’

Charley swore the moment he had left. ‘What a monster! Why won’t he listen? I think power has gone to his head.’

‘No. I think he genuinely believes he is acting in the city’s best interests. Put yourself in his shoes. If your city was caught up in a war and I told you there was no war, what would you think?’

‘I’d think you were insane,’ Charley said grudgingly after a moment’s hesitation.

‘The only way Rijzki could be certain is to shut off the field. And of course he dare not risk that.’

‘Then how are we going to prove we’re right? More importantly, Doctor, how are we going to prove we’re not spies? I don’t know about you, but I don’t much fancy being shot at dawn.’

‘Me neither.’ The Doctor sat back on the chair and put his feet on the table again. ‘Let me think this over.’

‘Yes, well, try not to think it over for too long. We don’t know how soon he’ll be back.’

The Doctor did not answer. His eyes were closed. He appeared to be sleeping.

Minutes ticked away, agonisingly slowly. It was impossible to tell how much time had passed when Charley heard footsteps in the corridor outside. ‘Doctor,’ she called, sitting up straight, her stomach twisting with anxiety as she wondered what the colonel may have planned for them.

The Doctor opened one eye. ‘Ha! About time too.’

The voices were louder now. One of them clearly belonged to a

woman. Before she could ask the Doctor what on earth he meant the key

rattled in the lock, the door opened and in stepped Ilona Hingis.

A guard stood behind her. He did not look happy. ‘I will inform the

colonel,’ he said. ‘I don’t think —’

‘I don’t care what you think,’ Ilona answered haughtily. But the

moment the door slammed shut behind her, the confident expression

slipped from her face and she closed her eyes, breathing out heavily and

swaying on her feet.

The Doctor immediately leapt up and rushed to her side, lowering her

into the chair he had just vacated. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ Ilona said, nodding at Charley. Her face was very pale. ‘Thank

you. I didn’t think I’d have the nerve to go through with it, but... well, here

I am.’

She looked around the room, frowning. ‘Have they treated you well?’

‘Yes,’ Charley assured her. ‘But I suspect that will change before

long.’

‘We’ll cross that particular bridge when we come to it,’ the Doctor said

before turning his attention back to Ilona. ‘Can you get us out?’

She shrugged. ‘My commander is negotiating with the military. We will

argue that you are both witnesses to the attempted murder of a police

officer and that you must be available to give statements and identify

suspects.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’ Charley felt like hugging her. ‘I thought

you’d abandoned us.’

Ilona shrugged. ‘I would not be here without the Doctor.’

He smiled at her. It was, Charley thought, a rather self-satisfied smile.

She remembered what he had said earlier. *I’m sure someone will show up before long.*

‘You knew, didn’t you? You knew she would try to help us.’

‘Human nature. You lot can be so predictable at times. Not that I’m ungrateful.’ He stood up and walked to the window, looked through the bars and then back at Ilona. ‘What are our chances?’

‘My commander is very persistent, Doctor.’

‘Then why are you here alone?’

‘In case the colonel decided on a summary execution.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’m sure he could have contrived an unfortunate accident for us while he and your commander were still arguing. Maybe it’s just as well he sent you here.’

Ilona looked away. ‘He didn’t exactly send me here.’

‘What?’ Charley couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘If you’re here off your own bat, what makes you think you can stand in his way?’

‘I’m beginning to ask myself the same question. It seemed like a good idea when I was following you here. Now I’m not so sure.’

‘You seem to know what you’re doing.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence, Doctor, but I really don’t. I only finished my training a few weeks ago. Tonight was the first time I used my gun.’

The Doctor stared at her. Then he began to laugh. ‘You people never cease to amaze me. You’re all so different! Some so stubborn, like our friend Rijzki. But some, like you, so brave!’

‘Brave?’ Ilona said. ‘I’ve never been so scared in my life.’

‘You had me fooled,’ Charley admitted.

‘It must run in the family.’

‘Your father was a policeman?’

‘No, he was an actor.’ She looked around the room helplessly. ‘I was stupid to think I could get away with this.’

‘Nonsense!’ the Doctor cried, putting both hands on her shoulders and staring her right in the eyes. ‘You can do *anything*, Ilona. And we need your help. We have to get out of this place so we can find out what went wrong.’

‘But the war —’

‘I told you, there is no war. All this suffering, all the deaths... it shouldn’t be happening. You must believe me, Ilona. Get us away from here and I’ll prove it.’

She looked unconvinced. ‘Well...’ she began, but got no further. Suddenly the door burst open and Rijzki strode in, face red with anger. ‘What is the meaning of this? What are you doing here?’

For a moment Charley thought Ilona didn't have the strength to go

through with it. But then the policewoman pushed herself up from the chair with deliberate slowness. 'I believe my commander has explained.'

Even though she was trying to appear calm and assured, Charley could hear the tremor in her voice.

'I don't care about your commander! This is not a police matter. These are suspected spies.'

'Suspected,' Ilona answered. 'Unless you can prove it for sure they will be taken into my custody.'

'This is not a court flaw,' the colonel barked. 'I don't need proof. I will have them taken outside and shot.'

'I don't think so,' Ilona said, and raised her arm. For a moment Charley thought she was going to hit him. But then she realised the officer was holding a gun and it was aimed at the colonel's head. 'They leave with me.'

'Ilona,' the Doctor warned. 'This is going too far. Put the gun down.'

'No going back, Doctor. We're in this together now.'

Charley could barely bring herself to look. 'Are you mad?'

Rijzki did not even blink. 'Your friend is right. You must be insane. This place is crawling with soldiers. They would cut you down before you were halfway along the corridor.'

Ilona stepped around and behind him, then pressed the gun into his back. ‘I hope for your sake that they don’t.’ She looked at the Doctor and Charley. ‘Whatever happens, stay close to me.’

‘I usually disapprove of guns,’ the Doctor sighed. ‘But I suppose we’d better go along with you, make sure you don’t get into any more trouble.’

Charley went ahead and opened the door. She eyed the corridor anxiously. It was empty. In the distance, an uncomfortably long way away, was the main entrance.

Ilona pushed past her, staying close to Rijzki. ‘Let’s go.’

The colonel glared at her but said nothing.

They moved swiftly down the corridor, their footsteps sounding so loud that Charley feared everyone in the building must have heard them.

But their luck held. At least, it held until they were only yards from the double doors leading outside. An alarm went off and the corridor quickly became alive with the clatter of soldiers running towards them.

‘Faster!’ Ilona called. They went through the doorway into fresh air and the sight of half a dozen soldiers at the bottom of the stone steps, rifles aimed at them. Ilona moved the gun from the colonel’s back and pressed it to his head where it could clearly be seen. ‘Be very careful,’ she said.

‘Shoot them,’ Rijzki ordered. It was the first time he had spoken since he had been taken captive.

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’m guessing that the good colonel here is the only one with the access code to shut off the containment field. If he dies, you’ll be stuck inside this city until it

collapses in on itself. Is that what you want?’

The soldiers looked at each other in confusion and, it seemed to Charley, with concern.

‘But you would also be trapped,’ the colonel said. ‘Which means you will not kill me. You might just as well put the gun down, Officer Hingis.’

‘And have your men shoot us?’ Ilona said. ‘I’ll take my chances.’

‘Now this is why I disapprove of guns,’ the Doctor said lightly. Ilona prodded the colonel and he began to walk slowly down the steps, the policewoman staying with him, pistol still up against his head. The soldiers did not attempt to stop them, but followed their progress with their rifles.

‘This is useless,’ Charley said quietly to the Doctor. ‘How far do you think we’ll get before the colonel tries something?’

‘Pretty far. I mean, I don’t think Ilona got here on foot.’

They hurried down the steps to catch up. Now Charley could see Ilona was guiding the colonel towards her car. When they reached it she opened the back door and ordered him inside, the gun trained on him all the while.

Ilona handed the gun to Charley. ‘Get in the back with him. Keep this pressed to his side. If he tries anything, shoot. We can’t get into any more trouble than we’re in now, so nothing to lose.’

While Rijzki said nothing in response his eyes conveyed what he would do to her, given the chance.

The Doctor and Ilona slid into the front. Ilona fired the engine, hitting the accelerator hard so that the tyres screeched as the car pulled away.

Charley kept a tight grip on the gun and watched the colonel carefully.

His eyes were closed, as if they were friends going for a relaxing drive in the country. In some ways, she thought, he and the Doctor were quite alike. They did not show their true feelings readily, but when they did, they did so with passion.

The headlights picked out snapshots of devastation as they raced through the dark city. Smashed doors, broken windows, brickwork stained black by smoke. Once or twice Charley thought she saw figures lying prone on the pavements, but the car was going too fast for her to be sure. So much for having it under control.

Was that why the colonel kept his eyes closed? To stop him from seeing the truth? He’d said people were safe, under his protection. He was wrong and he knew it, but, of course, he would never admit to that.

He really was a monster.

‘They’ll be after us by now,’ Ilona called. ‘I’ll take you to the station. We should be safe there.’

‘No, I have a better idea,’ the Doctor answered. ‘Take us back to the square where we found you.’

‘Why?’

‘So I can prove once and for all there is no war.’

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‘I’d like to believe you,’ Ilona said. ‘But I do not see how it can be true.’

‘Trust him,’ Charley told her. ‘He really does know what he’s doing.’

They fell silent then. The only sound was the rumble of the engine as Ilona drove at breakneck speed down side streets, avoiding the main roads to reduce the chance of the military spotting them.

Ilona pulled up a few streets away from the square, as a further precaution. They got out, Ilona taking the gun from Charley while she and Kijzki got out. ‘Where now?’

The Doctor looked around briefly, getting his bearings. ‘This way,’ he said, and set off. ‘Just around this corner, I think. Ah, yes — here we are.’

They turned off the main street and into the narrow lane where they had emerged from the TARDIS. It was so dark that Charley could barely

see the Doctor ahead of her, but he knew exactly where he was going. He fished a key from his pocket and put it in the lock. ‘Come on in.

We'll soon have this mess sorted out.'

Even with the gun at his back the colonel appeared reluctant to go

inside. 'A big blue box? Is this meant to be some kind of trick, Doctor?'

The Doctor held the door open. 'Please. I promise no harm will come

to you.'

'I wish I could say the same for you,' the colonel growled but he went

through anyway. Ilona went to follow but the Doctor stopped her with one

hand on her shoulder. 'Thank you. You're one of the bravest people I

know. And don't talk to me about acting. That was the real thing. Now go

on — get inside.'

The moment Ilona stepped through the door she came to an abrupt

halt.

Rijzki too was looking around in deep shock.

Charley felt sorry for them — at least, for Ilona — knowing exactly

what they were feeling.

'This is impossible,' Ilona breathed.

'Just another trick!' But Rijzki looked a lot less certain than his words

suggested.

'No tricks,' the Doctor called back as he made his way swiftly to the

console. He began flicking switches and turning dials until lights began to

surge up the console's central column and that oh-so-familiar whooshing

sound filled the air as the TARDIS engines burst into life. Ilona looked

at

Charley, eyes wide. Charley nodded back in reassurance. The last thing

she wanted was for Ilona to panic and lose concentration. The colonel

would have the gun in a flash.

‘Here,’ she said, reaching out. ‘Give it to me. I’ve grown used to this.’

Ilona handed her the pistol carefully, keeping it out of Rijzki’s reach. He

didn’t even seem to notice. His eyes, Charley saw, were on the console.

‘What manner of technology is this?’ he said. ‘It’s like nothing on

Earth.’

‘Funny you should say that,’ the Doctor called. ‘Long story, I’ll explain

later. For now, I suggest you hold on to something. I think it’s going to —’

The TARDIS lurched. We’re through the containment field, Charley

thought as she staggered to one side, grabbing hold of one of the

internal columns to stop herself from falling.

‘... get a bit bumpy,’ the Doctor finished. He hit some more switches

and the engines slowed, finally stopping altogether. ‘Well, we’re here.

Safe and sound. Five minutes and we’ll be on our way again.’

The colonel eyed the gun in Charley’s hand, as if planning a move.

Charley tapped the weapon against her leg and raised her eyebrows.

‘I have very quick reactions.’

Rijzki smiled coldly. ‘Maybe. We shall see. Now, shall we get this

charade over with?'

'With pleasure.' The Doctor pulled a lever and the door swung open.

Sunlight streamed in, so bright after the darkness that all four of them

closed their eyes against it. The air that came in with the light was fresh

and cold.

Of course it is, Charley told herself. It's Christmas Eve!

Rijzki took a hesitant step forward, frowning deeply. He went outside,

Charley and Ilona following.

'My God!' the colonel exclaimed.

Charley nodded. 'My sentiments exactly.'

They had materialised on a hillside overlooking the city. But of Prague

itself, there was no sight. It was obscured by a shimmering dome. As

Charley's eyes adjusted to the light she could see swarms of vehicles

had surrounded the dome, along with dozens of green tents. Even from

such a distance she could make out the familiar Red Cross logo on many

of them.

'Pretty quiet considering there's a war going on, wouldn't you say?'

said Charley. She looked to Ilona, and could see the confusion on her

face. 'This cannot be! It was on the broadcasts. The invasion...'

'Never happened,' the Doctor said from behind them. 'There has

been no war.'

'If there has been no war,' Rijzki said, ignoring the gun in Charley's

hand and striding threateningly towards the Doctor, 'why were we...

was I

ordered to put up the shield? Why was the city allowed to fall into chaos

with who knows how many lives lost? There is only one reason, Doctor.

We were under attack. Our government did not even get the chance to

issue full instructions before their signal was cut off. Doesn't that suggest

invasion to you?'

'No,' the Doctor said, calm in the face of the colonel's belligerence.

'Come back inside. I'll show you.'

Would I discover that this war was somehow just a misunderstanding,

a silly mistake of some kind?

The colonel's words, spat out while she and the Doctor were being

held captive. Funny how things turn out, Charley thought. Without

knowing it, the colonel had been absolutely right.

It had been a simulation, a civil-defence exercise.

The containment-field technology was new. It had to be tried out.

'Some bright spark thought that if they were going to test the shield,

they might as well test it for real,' the Doctor had explained. 'Contain the

city, mobilise the forces, ensure there was no panic. Something was

bound to go wrong...'

Someone screwed up with the planning, Charley thought. Some

committee of military strategists who thought they had all the angles covered.

What they — those clever military strategists — had not anticipated was just how effective the shield technology was. It was supposed to have offered protection. It did much more than that. The moment it went up, all communication with the outside world was lost. Rijzki had genuinely thought his city was under attack, and there had been no way of letting him know otherwise.

All this they had garnered from the encoded military broadcasts which suddenly started transmitting the moment they had cleared the containment field. And which the colonel had no choice but to accept as genuine.

'I suppose it's just as well you wanted to spend Christmas in Prague,' the Doctor said, after Ilona and the colonel had left. 'Otherwise they'd have all been stuck inside forever.'

'Rijzki,' Charley answered, shuddering. 'A typical military monster.'

'Don't be so harsh on him, Charley. He was no monster, he was only doing what he thought was right. He had no way of knowing he was wrong. I think he learned something, in the end.'

'Maybe,' Charley answered. 'I hope so.'

The four of them had stood outside the TARDIS for several moments, taking in the frenetic activity around the city, Charley remembered.

‘You were right all along,’ Rijzki had said, though he had been shaking his head as if he still did not believe what he was seeing. ‘How did you…?’

‘Some questions are better not asked,’ the Doctor had said. ‘You’re a good man, colonel. But do you know the difference between a good leader and a great one?’

‘I suppose you’re going to tell me.’

‘Never assume you’re right just because you think you’re right. Listen to what others have to say. You never know… they might be right too.’

Rijzki had narrowed his eyes. Then smiled. ‘I’ll remember that. Doctor.’ He’d then turned to Ilona. ‘And I’ll remember you too. I could

have you shot. But I suspect I could put someone of your… abilities to good use.’

Ilona had simply stared at the glistening containment field. ‘Perhaps, one day,’ she’d said. ‘But first there is a lot of work to be done.’

That had been two hours ago. Still the shield remained in place. ‘A virus outbreak!’ the Doctor suddenly exclaimed.

‘What?’

‘I knew something had happened in Prague about now.’

‘Yes, but a virus outbreak?’

He began pacing around the TARDIS. ‘That’s how this went down in

history. A virulent strain of flu that had to be contained! Well, they could

hardly tell the truth, could they? So many people dying in a time of

peace, in a war that never happened.'

Charley peered nervously outside. This was not over while the shield

stayed up. What if Rijzki had fooled them all? What if he had merely

pretended to believe them only to have Ilona arrested later? There could

be troops creeping up on them in the darkness, or on their way. 'I don't

—' she started, before falling suddenly silent.

Something drifted past the open doorway. Something white and

small. Charley stepped into the street, grinning widely.

It was still dark but not because of the shield. It was dark because it

was night.

Breathing in cold clean air, Charley looked to the sky and began to

laugh as snow tickled her face.

The End of Now

Chris Roberson

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Romana

‘Where are we this time, Romana?’

The Doctor, his feet propped up, his hat down over his eyes, waved absently in the direction of the TARDIS controls.

‘Earth again, Doctor. Thirtieth century.’

The Doctor shuddered, and pushed up the brim of his hat, his mouth pursed in a moue of distaste. ‘Grey cities linked by grey highways across

a grey desert. Slag, ash and clinker — the fruits of technology.’

‘Prague, to be specific,’ Romana added.

‘Ah, well.’ The Doctor brightened, flashing a toothy smile. ‘It’s not all bad, then, eh?’

He patted the TARDIS control console affectionately. ‘Good old randomiser.’

Prague. Always Prague. The Golden City, eternal. I am here. I am away, but only for a moment. I never leave. Now.

I arrive, wander Europe, lost. Tycho Brahe finds me, takes me to Hven, to Uraniborg, his castle of the heavens. He asks me to speak of future events, of the world to come, to entertain his party guests. Me, and the moose. At least until the moose drinks too much beer, stumbles, and

falls to its death. Tycho is in a dark mood after that. But I console myself in the knowledge that we are in Denmark only a short while, and then we are back in Prague to stay.

Prague. Now approaches.

'Have you ever been to Prague before, Romana? Wonderful place, Prague. The only place in the universe where one can...' The Doctor trailed off, eyes wandering around the Old Town Square as though he might find the word he was searching for written somewhere nearby.

'Relax entirely?' Romana said helpfully.

'No, I shouldn't think so.' The Doctor shook his head, and locked the TARDIS door behind them. 'I won't need another nap for hours. Shall we

get a bite to eat, or would you rather...'

He squinted up at the Astronomical Clock overhead.

'And, yes, I have been to Prague before. With you.' Romana looked around them, her eyes narrowing warily. 'Doctor, something's wrong. Something's —'

'Stretched,' the Doctor said, nodding slowly. 'It's as though the fabric of time itself were being strained, the connections between each moment

becoming distorted.'

Romana pointed to the locals bustling about them on all sides, carrying on the business of the city. 'No one else seems to have noticed.

Just us perpetual outsiders, eh?'

'Something like that. Mmm. Just a moment.'

The Doctor took a few long strides away from the TARDIS, stopped,

and put one hand on his forehead. Pointing in front of him with the other,

eyes squeezed shut, he spun on his heel like a weather vane. After he'd

made three complete revolutions, he stopped, pointing towards the south

and east.

'That's the direction of greatest distortion, I should think.'

Romana cast the Doctor a sidelong glance. 'You wouldn't prefer to

use the TARDIS sensors, instead?'

'What? Don't you trust me? When you've crossed the time field as

many times as I have, my dear, you'll learn a trick or two. Do you know

that I once —'

'All right, all right,' Romana interrupted, with a sigh and a smile. 'We'll

do it your way. And if we get thirsty along the way, perhaps you can

dowse us up a drink of water.'

'Why, Romanadvoratrelundar, I believe you're mocking me.'

Romana grinned, and threaded her arm through his. 'Never, Doctor.

Perish the thought. Now, lay on.'

In the shadows, not far off, a diminutive, misshapen figure watched

their progress, unnoticed.

Wars, wars, wars. The Swedes under Hans Christoff von Königsmarck occupy the city's west bank, and police fire tear gas and water cannon at anti-globalist protesters on the river's far side. The airplanes of the United States bomb, mistaking Prague for distant Dresden, and the Count of Tilly rounds up 27 nobles and executes them on the Old Town Square. The Red Army marches in, the French-Bavarians march in, the Nazis, the Prussians, and the Red Army again. War and peace and revolution and peace and war again. Prague Spring and Velvet Revolution. Ludvic Vaculik's Two Thousand Words *and Václav Havel's Civic Forum. Moments of quiet, moments of clamour, moments of calm and of riot.*
But through it all, the city remains, defiant and eternal.

At the heart of the temporal distortion, in what was once the Centre for Theoretical Studies of Charles University but since the rise of the Empire had been called simply the Academy, the Doctor and Romana found the laboratory of Kaj Jepperson. And, more specifically, they found
Jepperson.
'Excuse me,' the Doctor said, leaning in the open door. 'Mr

Jepperson, is it? I was hoping we might have a word.'
Jepperson — who appeared gaunt and harried, Romana noticed — looked up from the pile of equipment and instruments on the bench before him. His flashing eyes were like little pools of ice, startling

blue.

‘Look,’ he said angrily, ‘I’ve answered all of your questions, all right, a hundred times over. Now if I’m not allowed to get on with my work, then I’ll have *you* lot to blame. But when the Provost has me reduced to my constituent elements and recycled, all because he doesn’t yet have his damnable time machine, I’ll make sure that members of the investigative bureau are right there in the reduction chamber beside me.’

‘Time machine?’ Romana glanced at the Doctor, an eyebrow arched.

‘Yes, of course,’ Jepperson answered impatiently. ‘And with Hrabal and Smetana gone, it’s that much more difficult. That you lot think I had anything to do with their murders is laughable. As though I’d *choose* to complete such delicate work without assistance.’

‘Murders?’ The corners of the Doctor’s mouth turned down, his grin forgotten.

Jepperson sighed heavily. ‘The cases of Frantiek Hrabal and Emilie Smetana. That’s what you’re here to ask about, isn’t it? Well, all in I know is what the newsfeeds tell me; that they were found brutally murdered, first one and then the other, with witnesses reporting having seen a child fleeing the scene each time.’

‘Gruesome.’ Romana shivered.

‘I wasn’t here to ask about any murders,’ the Doctor said, eyebrows

raised. ‘Romana, were you?’

‘Not that I’m aware of, Doctor.’

Jepperson narrowed his eyes, and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Then what are you here about?’

‘You *did* say time machine, didn’t you, Jepperson?’ The Doctor

stepped forward, peering at the equipment on the workbench. ‘Just what

sort are we talking about, then?’

The Doctor reached out towards a curved metal assemblage, but

Jepperson slapped his hand away.

‘Watch it, you fool! My experiment is at an extremely sensitive stage,

and if your blundering were to interrupt the coil’s accumulation of zygma

energy, then it could threaten to ruin years of work.’

Romana gasped, her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. She knew

precisely what this meant. ‘Zygma energy?’

The Doctor shook his head sadly. ‘Oh, dear.’

The city is flooding; huge swathes of the city are being destroyed.

The city is flooding; the people are evacuating, but nothing significant is

harmed.

And still the waters rise, the waters recede. Rise, recede, ebb and

flow.

‘He’s making the wrong decision, Doctor.’

‘Oh, undoubtedly.’

‘And it’s going to end badly.’

‘Unquestionably.’

‘So what are we going to do?’

‘At the moment? We’re looking for something to eat. If memory serves, there was a place just around the corner here that served splendid kolaches. Have you ever had one, Romana? Quite possibly one of humanity’s finest achievements, the kolache.’

The two Time Lords were making their way down a quiet street in the Maid Strana, near the Hradcany stair. They’d tried to convince Jepperson to abandon his experiments, citing the dangers of the zygma energy which powered the device, but he’d refused to hear any of it. That he’d booted them from his laboratory without apology or excuse indicated he had no intention of discussing the matter rationally.

Romana had been sure that the Doctor would immediately launch some clever stratagem, intervening to avert the potential danger. It seemed, though, that the Doctor had different plans, plans which at the moment involved little bits of sausage baked into bread.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the Doctor would have to wait a while yet to have his appetite sated.

‘Doctor?’

‘Hmm?’ The Doctor kept his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his

attention on the cobbled street before them.

‘I think someone’s following us.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘The fact that someone’s following us, for starters.’

‘Are they?’

The Doctor stopped short, and spun round.

There, behind them, stood a misshapen, dwarfish figure. His face was asymmetrical, distorted, like a wax statue allowed to melt and then cool.

One arm was longer than the other, his legs bandy, his fingers twisted and gnarled. The top of his head was no higher than the Doctor’s belt, though he was broader in the shoulder than Romana.

‘I am waiting.’ The figure’s voice rasped, his tone seeming to doppler up and down as he spoke, as though he were moving back and forth at high speeds. ‘Waiting for you I am. But I am thinking you are never coming. You are here.’

There was something perplexingly familiar about the small, strange man. Particularly around the eyes, which were startling blue, like pools of

ice.

‘These moments are obscured, hazy,’ the small figure went on. ‘Is it yet now?’

The Doctor leaned forward, wearing a perplexed look. Jepperson?’

The city is a place of art, and of science. The brightest burn brighter here. Kafka and Kundera. Einstein and Mozart. I fool myself, thinking that in such a place there might be one who will help find a way to escape my condition, but I realise that there is no escape, nothing to do but to wait for the arrival of now.

* * *

Is it now?'

The Doctor and Romana, accompanied by the strange dwarfish figure, had retired to a café, and discussed matters over hot cups of strong black coffee.

'I believe you've asked that before, my friend,' the Doctor said.

'I'm still not sure that I understand properly,' Romana added. 'You are the same Kaj Jepperson we spoke with earlier?'

'Yes,' the Doctor answered, while the dwarfish figure fussed with his coffee. 'But mutated by prolonged exposure to zygma energy. His DNA helixes separated and recombined incorrectly.'

'I remember you,' the small man said, looking confused. 'But from before. From the lab. I am not remembering you from now.' He stopped,

a quizzical expression on his twisted features. 'How strange.'

'But when did all of this happen, Doctor? It can't have been more than a quarter of an hour since we saw him.'

'Oh,' the Doctor said thoughtfully, 'I suspect it's been a great deal longer than that for our friend here.' He leaned forward, and rested a

hand on the gnarled hand of the figure before them. ‘Tell us, Jepperson.

When does it happen?’

‘The experiment begins,’ the twisted figure answered, his voice

dopplering up and down, ‘it began, it will begin. It malfunctions, throwing

me backwards in time. But I remain tethered to the moment, to the

instant of the accident. My time sense distorts, is distorted, will distort, so

that all moments are one. Now.’

‘How long, Jepperson?’ The Doctor’s mouth drew into a tight line.

‘How long has it been.’

The twisted figure let out a ragged sigh. ‘Fourteen centuries.’

‘Oh, dear.’ Romana covered her mouth with her hand, eyes widening.

‘Unable to distinguish one moment from the next.’

‘Yes, and for nearly one and a half millennia.’ The Doctor glanced

from Romana to the twisted figure before them. ‘An eternal "now".’

‘I wander, lost. I try to communicate, but everyone takes me for mad.

Until Tycho Brahe finds me, found me, will find me. He finds my ability to

describe future events an idle curiosity. Calls me Jepp, keeps me as a

pet.’

The twisted figure of Jepperson looked at the Doctor and Romana for

a brief moment, as though seeing them for the first time. ‘Is it now?’ Then

he glanced about, seeing the city around him, and seemed reassured. ‘I

stay in Prague, always. I leave only to escape fire, or bombing, or flood,

but only short distances. I am in Prague, I will be, I was. Its constancy is

my anchor, my solace, my home. Until now.’ He dropped his eyes to the

ground, and drew a ragged breath.

‘Doctor, do you suppose...’ Romana began, but the Doctor waved her

quiet.

Jepperson,’ the Doctor said, his voice level but firm. ‘What about the

others? Why did you do it? Why did you kill Hrabal and Smetana?’

The twisted figure glanced up at the mention of the names,

momentarily confused. ‘I am talking to them. I am talking to Hrabal. I am

talking to Smetana. I am trying to dissuade them from continuing the

experiment. I am telling them who I am, what will happen, is happening,

has happened. But they are startled, try to run, try to call for help. I am

not intending to kill them. It is an accident. But with them dead, perhaps

the experiment is not happening, will not happen, has not happened. I

don’t know. But I will stop it. Is it yet now?’

Now approaches. I cannot see. As the instant of the experiment

draws near, I am moving into a haze. I cannot see what is happening.

There are the two strangers, the man and the woman. I remember then

from before, when they visited me in the lab, but I am not remembering them in the Malá Strana. As now approaches, I cannot see. What will happen? Is it now?

'Stop! What you will do should never have been happening.'

The Doctor and Romana stood just outside the open door, flanking the twisted figure, while Kaj Jepperson looked up from his lab bench, a confused expression on his gaunt face.

The diminutive, malformed creature whom Jepperson had become, centuries ago, rushed into the laboratory, waving his gnarled hands.

'The experiment must be stopping,' he yelled. 'I must be freed from what is happening next!'

Kaj Jepperson leapt in front of the dwarfish figure, barring his way.

'Who *are* you?!'

While Jepperson faced himself, unknowingly, the Doctor raced around to the other side of the laboratory, intent on examining the mechanism for himself. It hummed a throbbing pulse, and seemed to vibrate visibly.

'It's too late, Jepperson!' the Doctor shouted, teeth barred. 'The zygma coils have already begun to accumulate energy, and the parallax synchrone is already fully charged!'

'It does not matter, Doctor,' the twisted Jepperson replied defiantly. 'The experiment must be stopping. I must be free!'

The dwarfish figure tried to push past, but when the younger Jepperson reached out and grabbed for his shoulder, the dwarf displayed surprising reserves of strength, throwing Jepperson bodily over a bench, sending him skidding painfully across the floor.

‘Doctor, look out!’ Romana cried, as the dwarf rushed towards him.

‘Think, Jepperson!’ The Doctor stepped forward, interposing himself between the twisted Jepperson and the object of his ire. ‘If you try to shut down the time machine, the accumulated zygma energy won’t be sent back into the past, as happened before, but will be unleashed in the present, in the here and now.’

‘But that...’ The twisted Jepperson was brought up short, watery eyes widening.

‘That amount of zygma energy could destroy the entire city!’ Romana stepped away, reflexively, as though another few feet of distance would do any good.

‘That’s right, Romana.’ The Doctor looked from the twisted Jepperson to the machine and back again. ‘It would destroy Prague, and everyone in it.’

The younger Jepperson was back on his feet now, and rushed to his machine, shouldering the Doctor out of the way. As the Doctor went to stand beside Romana, the younger Jepperson examined his machine

carefully.

‘I don’t know what you people are on about, but I won’t have it,’ the younger Jepperson barked. ‘These are incredibly sensitive operations I’m performing here, and the slightest disturbance could ruin countless hours of work.‘

‘Oh, it could ruin countless hours, all right,’ the Doctor said. He turned to the twisted Jepperson, who stood rooted to the spot, his gnarled hands in white-knuckled fists, his eyes narrowed at the hated object hulking on the laboratory bench. ‘Well, how about it, Jepperson?’

‘How about *what*?’ the younger Jepperson asked.

‘I’m not talking to *you*,’ the Doctor snapped, fire in his eyes.

‘But, Doctor,’ Romana said. ‘If we let the experiment proceed, we’d be condemning Jepperson to centuries of pain and loneliness.’

‘That’s right, Romana. That’s why *we’re* not going to do anything. *He* is.’ He pointed a finger at the twisted Jepperson. ‘So what’s it to be, then,

eh, Jepperson?’

The younger Jepperson looked at the twisted figure before him, a horrible realisation creeping over him.

‘Destroy my beloved city?’ the twisted Jepperson said. ‘I cannot. Not even to free myself.’

The younger Jepperson looked down at the instrumentation on the machine before him. ‘The coils are at maximum charge,’ he announced.

His voice sounded distant, and far away, as though receding at speed.

‘Everything is automatic from here.’

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The twisted Jepperson nodded. ‘I am thanking you, Doctor. I shudder as I think of what I might have been doing.’ He gave a weary sigh. ‘Is it now?’

‘Yes.’ The Doctor nodded, smiling sadly. ‘I believe it is.’

The throbbing hum of the time machine reached a crescendo, and the twisted form of Jepperson dissolved in a cascade of zygma energy, while his younger self was dragged screaming from his space-time frame of reference, hurled back into the past.

I am confused. There had been a noise, and lights, and motion. Then the lab and the strangers and the little man were gone. Only I remain, and I am here. In Prague. Always Prague.

Now.

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Suspension and Disbelief

Mary Robinette Kowal

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor

The Doctor adjusted the celery on his lapel and stepped out of the TARDIS onto Kampa Island, nestled under the Charles Bridge. He inhaled with appreciation. ‘Ah, Prague.’

The setting sun cast long shadows through the stone pilings of the bridge, which rose from the Vltava River like the battlements of a Gothic castle.

A scream fell from above.

Both hearts pounding, the Doctor spun as a man hurtled over the edge of the bridge. Limbs flailing, the man landed on the island with a bone- cracking thud.

The Doctor raced forward but before he took more than five paces, the man sat up.

No human could have survived that fall.

The man stood and took a few steps. He waved at the Doctor. Then he flew upward as if pulled by a Velderon tractor beam.

Something was very wrong. In 2181, no one on Earth had the resources to power that kind of anti-gravity technology. Earth was not due to recover from the Oil Wars for another fifty years.

Which meant there was an alien on the bridge.

The Doctor sprinted up a set of stairs switchbacking to the top. By the balustrade, a young woman knelt over a prone body, wrapping it in cloth.

‘Excuse me.’

She looked up, her face eerily pale in the shadow of the balustrade.

‘Who are you supposed to be?’

‘I’m the Doctor, and you are?’

‘Ma.’ She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘Sorry, the Edwardian clothes should have tipped me off, but I’m a little... so are you in earnest?’

‘Very much so.’ He knelt by the cloth, trying to see the body.

Kája’s hands shook as she tugged the cloth into place. ‘When does earnest open?’

He blinked. ‘Pardon me?’

‘The show. *The Importance of Being Ernest*. When do you open?’

'Ah!' She was talking about theatre. ‘I’m sorry. I thought you meant —’

The Doctor shook his head trying to return to the subject of the body.

‘Look. I don’t think you’re in a position to quiz me when you’ve got a dead body here.’

Kája looked up sharply; her eyes were red. For the first time, he realized that she had been crying. ‘It’s not a body.’ She pulled the cloth

back to show the face. ‘It’s a marionette.’

The falling figure made sense now; she had thrown the marionette over the side of the bridge and then pulled it up by the strings. The marionette was as big as a man, and eerily lifelike. Its smooth face stared up at the sky as if it were counting stars. A wig of black hair cupped the head in a bowl cut. Though its features were more aquiline, it had something of the look of Adric about it. The Doctor looked away from the marionette. Now was not the time to think about Adric. ‘Who is it supposed to be?’

She stared at the marionette, her face very still. ‘My fiancé.’

‘Fiancé?’

She looked at him like he was dim. ‘A copy of him. I was making Juro Janosík for our production of Krofta’s puppet play and used Dusan as the model.’

‘Why did you throw it over the side of the bridge?’

Her eyes filled with tears and she suddenly looked much younger than the Doctor had thought. ‘They’re executing Dusan tomorrow. I know it’s crazy, but I thought that if I knew what it would look —’ A sob broke out of her. Kája covered her mouth with her hands as if she could hold in her grief.

The Doctor patted his pockets, looking for his handkerchief, and found it buried beneath his cricket ball. ‘I’m sorry.’ He offered her the

handkerchief.

Kája took it and wiped her eyes. ‘I don’t want to cry tomorrow. I don’t want Dusan to see me like this. Not at the end.’

‘Why are they…?’

‘Killing him?’ She caressed the marionette’s cheek. ‘He cut down a tree so I could make a puppet.’

The Doctor winced. After the Oil Wars, fuel had become so scarce that rampant deforestation had made most nations impose strict penalties on unauthorised logging. ‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘Not unless you’ve got a handy deus ex machina that can get through a security system and back out again.’ Kája laughed as if her breath were tearing out her insides. ‘I had fantasies about swapping the puppet for Dusan but there’s no way in.’

Deus ex machina… The old theatre term made the beginnings of a plan stir in the back of the Doctor’s head. ‘Actually… I might be able to help with that. Where are they keeping Dusan?’

‘At the New Town Hall.’

The Doctor nodded as one piece of the plan fell into place. The first defenestrations of Prague had occurred at the New Town Hall in 1419. He had not been able to stop those, but he knew where the cells were. All he had to do was pilot the TARDIS in and swap the puppet for Dusan.

He frowned, thinking. A static figure would not fool the guards. ‘Do you

have another puppet made from the same wood as Janosík?'

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For the second time that night, Kája looked at him as if he were dim.

'Yes. I do. Why?'

The Doctor scooped up the marionette version of Dusan and slung it

over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. 'Get the other puppet and meet me at

the foot of the stairs.'

Will you tell me why, or do I have to guess?'

The Doctor paused at the top of the stairs. How many times had he

had to get someone to trust him without explaining that he was a Time

Lord? 'I have a way to get Dusan back. But I need that other puppet.

Unless you have another plan...'

Something in her seemed to give. He had seen this before, with other

people in other times. When things seemed hopeless, they were willing

to trust anyone who might have an answer.

Kája nodded. 'All right. I'll see you there.'

Under the bridge, the hum of his sonic tuner reverberated off the

stones. Designed for fine-tuning tools like his old sonic screwdriver, it

could also adjust the sonic resonances in other items. The Doctor held

the bulky thing over the joint of the Dusan puppet, focusing on getting the

resonance aligned with the smaller Pulcinello marionette lying next to it.

Kája leaned against the TARDIS, braiding the strings she had cut from the Dusan puppet. ‘It’s getting light.’

The Doctor grimaced. He needed to finish tuning the wood quickly so Kája could have time to practise with it. ‘Almost finished.’

She tossed the string on the ground. ‘Finished with what? I can’t see that you’re doing anything.’

He moved the sonic tuner to the right wrist, the last joint remaining. ‘Do you play a musical instrument?’

‘Violin. Some.’ She squatted beside him. ‘What does that have to do with anything?’

‘Have you ever felt the instrument vibrate when someone else plays a note?’

She nodded.

‘That’s a sympathetic vibration caused by sonic resonance. Now if you get things exactly aligned, your instrument will produce a note.’ The Doctor sat back, finished. ‘Which is what I’m doing.’

‘Making music?’

‘No, look.’ The Doctor lifted the arm string of the Pulcinello marionette. Its arm raised in the air, following the string.

Beside it, the Dusan puppet raised its arm in unison. No strings connected them. Well, not visible strings, but through sympathetic vibrations of the wood, the two puppets were inextricably linked.

Kája gawked at the copy of Dusan. ‘How?’

‘Try it.’

Kája picked up the control of the marionette and rolled the puppet into

a sitting position. The puppet Dusan sat up. Hope returned to Ma's movements as she made Dusan stand, then walk. Each movement she made with the small marionette reproduced exactly in the large one.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. This looked like it was going to work. 'Right. I'll go and fetch Dusan now.'

Kája stared at him and instinctively turned the puppet to focus on him too. Six pairs of eyes seemed to demand an explanation.

The Doctor rested one hand on the TARDIS. 'This is my deus ex machina.'

The Doctor leaned the marionette in the corner of the TARDIS's control room and set a course for the interior of the New Town Hall. Short hops usually went well, as long as he avoided moving in time as well as space. The old girl could get cantankerous. When the TARDIS landed, the Doctor opened the door.

On a field. With two moons shining overhead.

He backed into the TARDIS. Adric sat in the corner, head slumped at yet another failure. The Doctor went cold and then his vision realigned.

Only the marionette sat in the corner.

The Doctor clenched his jaw. 'Not this time.' No one else would die on his watch. He would save Dusan.

He double-checked the course and smacked the control panel in frustration. He had transposed the coordinates of the cell and wound up halfway across the galaxy. Resetting them, the Doctor piloted the TARDIS into the cell of the New Town Hall.

He picked up the marionette and opened the door. Across the small cell, the puppet's duplicate, the real Dusan, pressed back against the wall. The Doctor lifted the puppet's hand and waved at Dusan. 'Hello. Kája's sent me to bring you home.'

The Doctor waited for Dusan's defenestration on the top of the Church of St Ignac, overlooking the New Town Hall. The real Dusan, hair bleached blond and cropped short, stood beside Kája. With the artifices of theatre he looked like someone else.

Kája kept looking at him as if she did not believe he were there. 'I hope your mother will be all right.'

Dusan said, 'She'll be fine. Show must go on and all.'

After returning with Dusan, the Doctor had no trouble explaining to the family that they had to carry on as if Dusan were still trapped in the New Town Hall. They understood that if the execution did not take place, the guards would come looking for him.

The Doctor smiled at Kája. 'The finale is in your hands.'

'I know.' She held the control of the small marionette. Without her

work, the guards would know that Dusan had escaped, leaving only a lifeless copy in his place.

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For the first part of the ordeal, Dusan's puppet would be out of sight in its cell, so Kája had to manipulate the puppet completely on instinct. The small marionette leaned against a wall, as if it were sleeping. The illusion of breath stirred its chest.

One of its arms jerked into the air without volition, as the control shifted in response to the invisible strings connecting it to the puppet of Dusan. 'They've come.' Kája began to work.

The Doctor watched, fascinated as she made the puppet struggle against invisible forces. He could see the guards dragging the puppet to his fate, as clearly as if they were represented by puppets as well.

Dusan's face blanched. 'There they are.'

Through the window on the tower of the New Town Hall, the puppet and the guards came into view. Kája, able to see now, drove the wooden elbow of the puppet into the belly of one of the guards. Twisting free, she ran Dusan's puppet straight to the window and leaped out, toes together with hands raised over its head like a diver. For a moment, the puppet seemed suspended by strings over the square below.

Then it fell.

The crowd of spectators surrounding the square gasped collectively as it hit the ground.

Kája dropped the control of her puppet. It lay on the roof, a lifeless, shattered thing.

Dusan wrapped his arms around her. Kája clung to him, weeping with relief.

Below them, Dusan's mother collected the body as if it were her son, weeping and wailing with more gusto than the Mourning Sect of Glertuon V. Weeping more, in fact, than the Doctor had when Adric died. But her son was alive.

The lovers released each other and turned to the Doctor. Dusan said, 'I can't thank you enough.'

Kája looked at the TARDIS and laughed with still dawning relief. 'I will never complain about a deus ex machina in a play again.'

The Doctor flourished a bow. 'Always glad to provide a happy ending.'

Leap Second

Bev Vincent

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Peri Brown

The moment Dr Hoffman said ‘thank you’ to denote the conclusion of his presentation, a man at the end of the fifth row raised his hand. Whereas most males in the audience wore jackets, the man with the urgent question was dressed in a threadbare cable-knit sweater and dark grey trousers, as if he’d wandered in on his way home from a deep-sea fishing expedition. Short, spiky, steel-coloured hair covered his head. A woollen hat rested on his lap, his sole concession to decorum.

‘Yes?’ Hoffman said, frowning at the man. ‘We have time to entertain a few questions.’

‘You haven’t compensated properly for geoid fluctuation in your calculations.’ The stranger’s sharp tone caused several people to stare.

‘We used the standard model.’

‘Which results in an uncertainty in the relative rates of atomic clocks at different locations of at least —’ he paused to perform the complex calculation in the air with his index finger two parts in ten to the seventeenth.’

‘Small enough to be ignored.’

The man pulled a pipe from his pocket, clamped it between his teeth,

gripped the bowl, yanked it out of his mouth and wagged the tip at Hoffman.

‘Nothing good will come of this. Mark my words.’

‘Your concern is baseless,’ Hoffman said. ‘Inserting a leap second will bring astronomer and physicist time into synchrony. It’s been done dozens of times in the past hundred-odd years. Once everyone adopts the TAT standard, we’ll never have to deal with it again.’

The man with the steel-grey hair shook his head. ‘This time will be different. Vastly different. There are dark days ahead.’ He stood and grabbed his overcoat from the seat beside him. have to go. I must prepare.’ He mounted the steps two at a time. The amphitheatre door slammed behind him.

Hoffman gazed up the centre aisle for several seconds before returning his attention to the audience. ‘Other questions?’

‘You must have something more appropriate,’ Peri said. Her hands were planted on her hips. ‘Those striped pants won’t do.’

‘What’s wrong with them?’ the Doctor asked. His legs jutted from beneath the TARDIS console. He was flat on his back, sorting through a

maze of coloured wires hanging from an access panel.

‘You’ll look out of place at a scientific conference.’

‘And you’d know this — how, exactly?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I’m a university student. I go to lectures all the

time.'

'Ah, yes. Botany, right?'

'You don't own a suit? Dark slacks?'

'I'll be fine. I tend to blend in.'

Peri knelt beside the Doctor, who was now poking around in the open

panel with an electrostatic soldering iron. 'When you told me you fixed

things, I didn't know you were talking about your time machine. I'm not

sure I like the idea of travelling through space in something as unreliable

as the old junker Howard bought when we were in Egypt. Held together

by bailing wire and gum.'

Their last landing had been at London's great Wembley Stadium in

the 19305. After dealing with someone who shouldn't have been there —

a time traveller from the future attempting to destabilise the monarchy —

the Doctor, pleased with his day's work, had told Peri that he specialised

in fixing problems. Surely he hadn't meant basic mechanics.

He glanced at her. 'You're blocking the light.'

She frowned when a shower of sparks erupted from the open panel.

'You sure you know what you're doing?'

'Trust me, Peri. I have a great deal of experience fine-tuning the

chronosensors.'

The Doctor pushed the wires back into the recess, replaced the

panel, scrambled to his feet and tapped several buttons on the console. He shook his head and pursed his lips.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s complicated.’

Peri frowned. ‘Try me.’

‘Do you know what a temporal anomaly is?’

She opened her mouth then stopped. ‘Not exactly,’ she said a moment later.

The Doctor jabbed his index finger at a small screen. ‘This says there will be one on Earth on 1 January 2100:

‘Okay.’ She stretched the word into several syllables.

‘But this one here tells me everything’s fine.’

‘I like that one better.’ She tossed her hair. ‘Are we really behind the Iron Curtain?’

‘Iron…? Ah, yes. No, the Berlin Wall came down long ago. Shortly after you left Earth, as a matter of fact.’ A quick smile lit up his face. ‘I wouldn’t take that personally, of course.’

‘No more communism?’

‘Eventually. At present — 31 December 2099, for your reference — Prague is the capital of the Pan-European Community.’

‘I thought it was the capital of Czechoslovakia.’

‘Countries. Quaint concept. Fluid, like time. Prague was once the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Before your time, of course.’

‘Time travel makes my head hurt.’ Another question formed in Peri’s mind, but before she could say anything, the Doctor said, ‘I have an idea.’

‘What?’

‘Why don’t you trundle off to the wardrobe and find something suitable to wear?’

‘Where was that again? I’m not very good with directions.’

‘It’s complicated…’

A bracing breeze entered the TARDIS when the Doctor opened the door. He grabbed his fawn-coloured blazer from the coat rack and pulled it on over his cricket sweater. From an inner pocket he extracted a rolled-up hat, which he perched on his head. Peri wore a beige blouse, powder blue blazer and matching skirt, covered by a long overcoat.

They took in their surroundings from a discreet corner near a building affixed with a sign declaring it part of Univerzita Karlova. Peri could see a medieval castle overlooking the city from its perch above the bridge crossing the river.

‘Brrrr. Twenty-ninety-nine, you said?’

The Doctor nodded absently.

‘Doesn’t look much different.’

‘In the grand scheme, a hundred years is a mere blink of an eye.’

‘If you say so.’

They followed posters pointing them towards the International Chronophysics Symposium. At the main entrance to the convention centre, a stocky man wearing a navy-blue overcoat and a woollen cap narrowly avoided running into Peri in his haste to exit. He muttered an apology without looking up. The Doctor turned to watch him thread his way through the crowd.

‘Strange,’ he told Peri. ‘He looked vaguely familiar.’

The centre of activity was an enormous amphitheatre containing about two hundred people. A man who looked at least eighty years old stood before a lectern at the front of the room. The Doctor and Peri took seats in the back row.

‘I don’t understand any of this,’ Peri whispered a few minutes later.

‘What’s optical frequency metrology?’

‘Shhhh.’ The Doctor perched his glasses on the tip of his nose and peered at the mathematical formulae projected on the screen behind the speaker.

Peri sighed and examined her fingernails.

Half an hour later, the audience erupted in applause. After a brief question-and-answer session, everyone filed out to the lobby for refreshments. The Doctor remained seated, lost in thought, until the

room was empty.

‘We travelled into the future to attend a boring lecture?’ Peri asked.

‘Earth scientists of this period have made great advancements in their ability to measure time. They’re reaching the point where time and gravity become scrambled together in a rather unmanageable fashion. It upsets the very notion of what people mean by "keeping time".’

‘You’re talking Greek, Doctor. I barely passed high-school physics.’

She scrunched up her face. ‘I thought travelling the universe was going to be exciting.’

The Doctor didn’t answer for several seconds. Finally, he said, ‘I took you to the F. A. Cup Final.’

‘You got me kidnapped,’ Peri said with a shiver. ‘I almost died before I was born...’ She frowned. The Doctor was staring at a spot on the wall.

‘You’re a million miles away.’

‘What?’ His eyes snapped into focus. ‘Oh, perhaps. I was thinking about that fellow we bumped into on the way in. I’m sure I’ve seen him before.’

‘Come on, Doctor. What are the odds of that?’

‘Higher than you might think. Let’s go.’

‘Maybe they have sandwiches outside. I’d kill for a good old tuna sandwich.’

In the lobby, Peri headed straight for the refreshment table and was

soon surrounded by men intent on impressing her with their research.

The Doctor watched long enough to convince himself she could handle

the attention, then located the man who had given the lecture. His badge

identified him as Donald Kleppner of MIT.

‘Fascinating talk, Professor.’

‘I’m delighted you thought so.’ Kleppner squinted at the Doctor’s lapel, frowned at what he saw, then regained his smile. ‘Our idea of using redshift to map the Earth’s gravitational field has merit. We’ve settled on a primary atomic frequency standard and a means of accurately comparing time around the world. All we need to deal with now are the solid tides.’

‘I’m more interested in your plan to add a leap second at the end of the day.’

‘Phsshst,’ Kleppner said. ‘I’ll be glad to have done with that nonsense. Getting away from the UTC standard is the best decision we’ve made in

decades. They almost dropped it a hundred years ago, but the astrophysicists raised a fuss. By adopting the TAI standard, we’ll never have to concern ourselves with leap seconds again.’

‘You don’t anticipate any problems, then.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Just a feeling.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Kleppner removed his glasses and wiped them on his

shirttail. ‘The question marks on your collar.’ He wagged the glasses in the Doctor’s face. ‘You’re one of those doomsayers worried about the apocalypse, aren’t you?’

‘Nothing could be further from the truth,’ the Doctor responded, glancing up to check on Peri.

‘Tempest in a teapot.’ Kleppner checked his watch. ‘We’re reconvening in a few minutes. Won’t you excuse me, Doctor… ah…’

‘Yes, quite.’

The Doctor was about to return to Peri when someone hissed at him from behind an enormous potted plant. He turned to see the man in the blue overcoat beckoning him closer.

‘Perhaps you should come out from there,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ll surely attract attention talking to a dracaena.’

The man eased himself from behind the plant, but kept the mass of spiny fronds between him and the conference attendees. ‘I noticed the oddest thing in the park by the river.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor adopted an air of feigned indifference while struggling to remember why the man seemed familiar.

‘A police call box. Blue. London, circa 1950. It vibrated when I put my hand on it.’

‘Interesting,’ he said as if he weren’t interested in the least.

Peri arrived at that moment, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a

plate of sweets in the other. She extended the latter towards the Doctor,

who shook his head. ‘Who’s this?’ she said, after a sip of coffee.

‘An aficionado of twentieth-century police call boxes.’

‘You mean the TARDIS?’ she asked before the Doctor could stop her.

She flushed in response to his glare and returned her attention to the

plate. ‘Couldn’t you have picked a form that blends in better?’ the man

asked. The Doctor furrowed his brow. ‘Broken chameleon circuit.’

‘I could fix it.’

‘I’ve grown accustomed to it.’ He gave the stranger his full attention.

‘Who are you?’

‘Folks here know me as Fergus, but you might remember me as

Techu. From the Academy.’ When the Doctor didn’t react, he continued.

‘I see I made a lasting impression. You’ve changed quite a bit yourself.

How many times have you regenerated?’

‘What are you doing here? On Earth? At this time?’

‘As you may recall, I dropped out of the Academy.’ He looked around

and lowered his voice. ‘After the controversy.’

The Doctor relaxed his shoulders. ‘Of course. That was a bit of

unpleasantness.’

Techu wrinkled his nose. ‘One way of putting it, I suppose. Listen, I

have things to do and the day is getting short.’ He laughed. ‘But it’s the

fact that it’s getting longer that’s the problem.’ When the Doctor opened

his mouth to speak, Techu cut him off. ‘I’ll explain everything later. Follow

me. Maybe you can help.’

* * *

While they walked, Techu used his pipe barrel to point out the sights. The ancient streets, lined with stately buildings, churches, shops, and theatres, meandered haphazardly around Staromestské námestí, the town square.

‘The university is one of the oldest in Europe, named after Karlova, Emperor Charles IV. Of course, this was all Bohemia back then. But it has no central campus — buildings and facilities are scattered all over the city.’

‘All very interesting, I’m sure,’ the Doctor said. ‘Where are we going?’

‘They call this area Staré Mesto, the Old Town. It’s been here for nearly a thousand years.’ He took them around a corner and stepped through a wrought-iron gate, down two steps to an unmarked door. He

fiddled with the lock and a few seconds later the door swung open. ‘For a

place of such age, it has some surprisingly modern facilities.’

He beckoned the Doctor and Peri to join him inside. When they stepped through the portal, Techu activated a switch. Brilliant white light

flooded the room, temporarily blinding Peri. As her sight cleared, she

saw a sophisticated instrument with lasers and sensors, connected to a liquid helium tank, humming in the corner.

'This is where it's all going to happen,' he said. He glanced at a digital display on the wall. 'In just over 12 hours.' He swiped the woollen cap from his head and rubbed at his grizzled face.

'The leap second, you mean?' asked the Doctor.

Techu nodded at the humming instrument. 'That's a cesium fountain atomic clock, accurate to one second in sixty million years. The grand ceremony takes place upstairs, but the real work is done here. Some pompous official will push a dummy button, but this computer is where the code will be entered at the appropriate moment.'

'I thought leap seconds were implemented simultaneously across the planet.'

'Normally, but this is the last one, so there are ceremonies tied in with the New Year around the world. *Fin de siècle* and all that. The big countdown: three, two, one... one.'

Peri peered at a computer screen. 'So what's the problem?'

'You've heard of the Y2K panic?'

Peri shook her head.

'In the 1990s, people realised a short cut early computer programmers took to save memory would cause problems when the year 2000 arrived. Calculations involving two dates would produce negative numbers.'

‘That was after my time,’ Peri said.

He looked at her with mild interest. ‘Was it? Anyway, everyone predicted a cataclysm. Computers would freeze up. Financial networks would be paralysed. Airplanes would fall from the sky. More than anything else, experts feared global blackouts. One pundit theorised that if the power stayed off just a few days, civilisation would collapse and it would take decades to recover. A new Dark Age.’

‘Sounds like hysteria to me,’ Peri said.

‘The danger was very real,’ the Doctor said. ‘Authorities took the situation seriously and fixed the problems before they occurred. Few people realised how narrowly catastrophe was averted.’

Techu wasn’t looking at the Doctor or Peri. Instead his attention was focused on the digital time display.

‘What are you afraid of, Techu?’

‘This time no one is worried, Doctor. No one’s prepared.’

Peri rolled her eyes. ‘Because of a stupid little second?’

‘You’re young,’ Techu said. ‘How little you know. You’ve travelled with the Doctor across hundreds, maybe thousands of years. On that scale, a second seems insignificant. But a lot can happen in a second.’

Moving faster than seemed possible, he produced a weapon from his overcoat pocket and pointed it at her. Her eyes widened, and she

froze.

‘One second from now, you could be dead.’ He returned the weapon to his pocket with a shrug and looked at the Doctor. ‘A second is long enough for a word that might alter your life.’ He looked at Peri again. ‘Or

a kiss that changes everything.’

Peri blushed and looked away.

‘In the past, leap seconds have confused banking transactions, caused navigational errors, sent satellites offline.’

‘Aren’t you overstating the risk?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Then why are you here?’

‘The temporal anomaly,’ Peri said.

‘An equipment malfunction,’ the Doctor said at almost the same instant.

‘Tell me more,’ Techu said.

The Doctor tucked his hands in his pockets. ‘I don’t understand it yet. One read-out says there will be an anomaly tomorrow. Another says everything will be fine.’

‘Ah, the great and mysterious course of time. Everything hinges on a series of inconsequential decisions.’ He moved towards an input panel. ‘Why don’t we plug in the "stupid little second" right now and be done with it?’

‘Is that wise?’

Techu shrugged. ‘Better now than later, according to my calculations.’

‘And if you’re wrong?’

The two men glared at each other.

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Peri said, ‘I have an idea.’

‘What?’ the Doctor and Techu said simultaneously without looking at her.

‘Why don’t we get in the TARDIS and jump ahead to tomorrow. That way we’ll know what happens and then come back and fix it.’

‘The Laws of Time forbid it,’ said the Doctor, sounding exasperated.

‘Because of the relative uncertainty in the TARDIS’s temporal navigation

system, we’d risk returning at the wrong moment. If we met our other selves, the energy discharge would short out the time differential.’

‘Oh, right. You mentioned something about that when I wanted to go to see The Who at Wembley again. The end of all things, I think you said.’

‘Even Time Lords must let history run its course with a minimum of interference,’ Techu said. His fingers flitted across the input module.

‘I wouldn’t recommend that,’ the Doctor said.

‘Me neither,’ said a gruff voice near the door. They turned to see a security guard pointing a weapon at them. ‘Step away from the console,

sir.’

Techu’s hand wavered.

‘I think you should listen to him,’ the Doctor said.

‘Compared to some of the places I’ve been imprisoned,’ the Doctor said, ‘this is quite nice.’

Techu paced the eight-foot width of their cell.

‘I wish you’d stop that. Everything all right over there, Peri?’

‘Peachy,’ she said from the adjoining chamber. ‘I could be on a beach in Morocco right now. All we seem to do is get in trouble, Doctor.’

‘Chin up. We won’t be here long.’

Techu stopped pacing. ‘Even staying overnight will be too long. We must stop them. Their calculations are all wrong. At midnight, they’ll introduce a tiny perturbation into the Pan-European power-and-communications grid. Unfortunately, nothing will happen right away.’

‘Why "unfortunately"?’ Peri asked.

‘If there were problems immediately, that would alert scientists in other time zones. Instead, the perturbation will work its way through the networks like a worm, setting up resonances and vibrations. After about eight hours there’ll be a total system meltdown that’ll cascade around the world. By tomorrow evening we’ll likely be under martial law. No one will be worried about letting us out of here then. We have to get out now.’

‘That’s going to be difficult.’

Techu and the Doctor turned to see who was speaking.

‘Hoffman,’ Techu said with obvious disgust.

‘I’m surprised you believe Fergus’s blather,’ Hoffman said to the

Doctor.

The Doctor returned his stare. ‘We haven’t been introduced.’

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‘Theodore Hoffman, esteemed professor of physics from the

University of Utrecht,’ Techu said. From the tone of his voice, it was clear

he didn’t hold Hoffman in much esteem.

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘I rather doubt that.’

Hoffman stared back, then blinked.

Peri gripped the bars between their cells. ‘What’s going on, Doctor?’

‘This man belongs on this planet no more than I do.’

‘What do you mean?’ Techu asked.

‘Your Doctor sees through my disguise. Well, that complicates

matters.’ Hoffman shrugged. ‘In a few hours it won’t matter. The leap

second will do exactly what you predicted, Fergus — and more. The next

few weeks aren’t going to be very pleasant around here. I’d eat well

tonight if I were you. It might be your last meal for a while.’

‘When do the rest of you arrive?’ the Doctor asked. ‘I assume there’s

an invasion force waiting nearby.’

‘A communications shuttle is stationed behind the moon. I’ll wait until

the indigents can’t put up significant resistance. Then I’ll send a signal,

reinforcements will swoop in and all this will be ours.’

‘Oh, no,’ Peri said.

‘You’ve come from the future,’ the Doctor said. ‘Your interference will

create a temporal anomaly.'

Hoffman grinned. 'That works to our benefit. It will accelerate the rapidly degrading situation across the planet.'

The Doctor looked through the bars at Peri. 'Their scheme may not work. Remember the sensors in the TARDIS.'

'By joining Fergus, you've branded yourself as another doomsday nut. No one will take you seriously. Happy New Year.' Hoffman turned and left without waiting for a response.

'What will we do?' Peri asked.

'First we have to get out of here. I don't suppose you have any other weapons tucked in your pockets,' he said to Techu.

Techu grunted.

'Let's see what I have.' The Doctor rummaged in his trousers and coat until he located a paper clip overlooked by the police. 'I once met a chap who could pick locks with a piece of wire like this.' He knelt in front of the door.

'Who was that Hoffman guy?' Peri asked.

'Shhh. This requires a great deal of concentration.' He pursed his lips and twisted the straightened paper clip in the lock.

'How did you know he wasn't from Earth?'

'Peri,' he said, then shook his head and sighed. 'I detected a subtle shift in a force field constructed around his features. An effective disguise

unless you know what to look for.'

'Where does he come from?'

'Based on the cloaking technology, I'd say from Vacua. A little over

three hundred years from now.' He expelled another long sigh. 'Funny,

this seemed easier when Mace did it.'

'You'll never unlock a jail door with a paper —'

A sharp click interrupted her. 'A-ha! The missing ingredient: a healthy

dose of scepticism.' He opened the door and began working on Peri's

cell. After he unlocked it, he led the others down the hall to a rear door

that opened onto a narrow alley.

'Now what?' Peri asked.

'We must stop Hoffman, or whoever he is.'

Techu guided them through winding, cobblestone streets in the

direction of the Institute of Physics. 'Stopping him won't be enough,' he

said. 'Someone else will push the button on his behalf. That's the genius

of his plan. He's lobbied for nearly a year to get scientists around the

globe to agree to it.'

'We have to do something,' Peri said.

'Everything would have been all right if your friend here hadn't

interrupted me back at the lab.'

'How would that have changed anything?' the Doctor asked.

‘If we can trigger the perturbation early, the adverse effects will show up here before many locations inject the leap second into their systems.

Limiting the scope of the system failures will allow us to recover. It’s only when the problem spreads to the entire planet that the outages become insurmountable.’

As they passed the Old Town Hall, a mechanical parade of apostles began marching between two little windows above the main dial of the Astronomical Clock on the façade. Other figures also went into motion, including skeletal Death, who pulled a bell cord. After the procession finished, a bird flapped its wings and crowed inside an alcove. All action ceased when the chimes announced the top of the hour.

‘Interesting.’ The Doctor pointed at the largest dial. ‘This represents the motion of the sun and the moon in the sky, and the ecliptic, the apparent rotation of the stars. And these medallions here on the second dial indicate the months and the signs of the zodiac.’

‘Legend says the old Town Councillors used hot pokers to burn out the eyes of the man who designed the Orloj so he could never create anything to rival its beauty,’ Techu said.

Peri shuddered.

‘It was originally set using a pair of sundials as references.’ Techu pointed at one of the figures. ‘Supposedly the skeleton can predict the

future.'

'I wonder what he'd tell us now,' the Doctor mused.

Techu tugged at his arm. 'We must go. Time is of the essence.'

'Isn't it always?'

The Doctor and Peri followed Techu back to the institute. When they passed the TARDIS, the Doctor ducked inside to gather tools to replace

the ones confiscated by the authorities. 'My paper clip trick won't work on

an electromagnetic lock,' he told Peri. 'No keyhole — and the police took

Techu's key.'

He unlocked the laboratory door faster than he'd picked the jail cell locks. Before opening it, he paused. 'I remember now why you left

Gallifrey. You expected me to speak on your behalf. To take your side.'

'Like I said, it would have only taken a second.'

'I didn't believe your calculations. Ultimately I was proven correct.'

'Everything isn't about scientific calculations. Sometimes you have to demonstrate faith in others. We're all fallible.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I've made a few mistakes in my time.'

'I'm asking for your faith again. There's nothing wrong with my calculations now.'

'History doesn't record a global catastrophe on Earth at the beginning of the twenty-second century.'

‘So that means I succeed.’

‘Or I stopped you from making a mistake. What if this is part of Hoffman’s plan?’

‘We did get out of that jail cell pretty easily,’ Peri said.

The Doctor rewarded her with a withering glare.

‘Then why did he stop me from entering the code earlier?’ Techu asked. ‘That might have merely been an efficient security guard.’

‘With or without us, the leap second will be inserted at midnight.’ The Doctor sighed. ‘Yes, quite.’

‘I know what I’m doing. Trust me.’

The Doctor nodded again and pulled open the door. The atomic clock purred in the corner, patiently counting the resonant frequencies caused by microwave beams striking supercooled cesium atoms. Techu strode straight to the computer terminal.

Peri moved next to the Doctor. ‘Are you sure this is all right?’

‘The displays on the TARDIS console still show two possible outcomes.’

‘What if he pushes that button and your computer tells us it was the wrong choice? By this time tomorrow the world might be on its way back to the Dark Ages?’

‘I have fond memories of the Dark Ages,’ the Doctor said.

Peri swatted his shoulder. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘He asked me to trust him. The last time we were in this position, I

didn't.'

'But he was wrong then.'

'And I knew otherwise. This time, I don't.'

'I thought you knew everything.'

The Doctor smiled at Peri. 'Usually.'

'So... we just let him do what he wants?'

A voice interrupted before he could respond.

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'You're persistent, Doctor. Normally an admirable trait. At the moment, it's simply annoying.' Hoffman levelled his weapon at the Doctor and Peri.

'Step away from the computer, Fergus, or the Doctor and his friend die.'

'Hoffman,' the Doctor said. 'I was hoping you'd show up.'

Peri's eyes widened. 'You wanted him here?'

'His presence confirms my suspicions. Go ahead, Techu.'

Techu's hand hovered over the keyboard. 'Almost ready.'

Hoffman thrust the weapon forward until its barrel touched Peri's neck. 'Doctor!'

'Don't worry. He won't shoot in here. He might destroy his computer or his precious atomic clock.'

'Or my head!'

'Carry on, Techu.'

Techu punched several keys, scrutinised the read-out, nodded in

apparent satisfaction, then pointed his index finger at a flashing red button. ‘Ready?’

Hoffman swivelled, aiming the weapon at Techu. ‘I said stop!’

The Doctor leapt forward and pushed the barrel upward. A deafening blast ensued, followed by a shower of plaster and ceiling tiles. The Doctor wrenched the weapon from Hoffman’s grasp.

‘It’s done.’ Techu said.

‘What now?’ Peri asked.

‘Now we wait,’ said the Doctor.

‘I don’t understand why you were pleased Hoffman arrived,’ Peri said. ‘He almost killed us.’

The Doctor was darting back and forth between the TARDIS’s master and informational control panels. They had just transported Hoffman to the Vaculikian shuttle and watched it depart for points unknown. ‘By attempting to interfere, he confirmed that Techu’s plan jeopardised his. Otherwise he would have simply left us alone.’ He looked at Peri. ‘Don’t worry. They won’t be back. When a Time Lord gets involved, the stakes are too high for most.’

Techu shook his head. ‘So you didn’t trust me after all.’

‘Does it really matter?’

‘Maybe not to you…’

‘What will you do now? I could take you back to Gallifrey or wherever

you'd like.'

'Vienna will do. I've built a good life there.'

'You'll be a hero once word gets out that you saved civilisation.'

'A week from now, when the power grid and communications system are back up, no one will remember my name.' He shrugged. 'Just as well. I wasn't cut out for celebrity. I prefer toiling in anonymity.'

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'What's next?'

'There's still work to be done in modelling the geoid fluctuations.'

Peri covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. 'Sounds fascinating.'

Techu shrugged. 'I have a better understanding of the importance of time than most.'

After they dropped Techu off near his lab in Vienna, the Doctor looked at Peri. 'Enough excitement for one day?'

Peri nodded. 'You bet. How about we go somewhere relaxing?'

The time rotor rose and fell in a dazzling display of coloured light. For now, everything seemed to be functioning properly.

'Just give me a second,' said the Doctor. 'I'll see what I can do.'

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Lady of the Snows

James Swallow

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor

She was sleeping when Yan looked in, her chest gently rising and falling beneath the threadbare thermal blanket. It seemed right that she be there, surrounded by the frames of his finished and unfinished art. The composition of the scene was correct in a way that something arranged never could have been. Yan's hand dallied at the sketcher in his pocket, but the light was poor and he didn't want to use the lantern unless he really needed to.

He wrote her a note in large, careful letters, taped it to the flap and ran his finger up the seal strip. Yon put on his careworn army-surplus coat and closed up the bubbletent behind him. He felt uncomfortable leaving her alone, but he felt uncomfortable staying with her while she slept. He couldn't concentrate. He kept breaking off from whatever he was doing to listen to her breathing. She drew him away from everything else.

He folded up his collar and buried his hands in the pockets. Yan picked his path through the colony of smart plastic domes that clustered together for warmth on the banks of the Vltava River. A thin cat watched

him peevishly from the ragged yurts where the New Bohemians huddled

against the constant chill of winter. Yan kept himself on the edge of their

escapades, eschewing the endless arguments over manifestos that

seemed to be their sole contribution to the city's arts; but financial

circumstances forced him to remain in their orbit at the tent village. He

got by trading bandwidth and doing minor wetware repairs for the less

disagreeable ones among them. It had been awkward at first after they

learned she was living with him, but after a while their attentions had

drifted back to themselves and the new arrival had been forgotten.

He sighed, climbing the steps until he was on the riverbank. The sight

of the castle greeted him and, nestled close by, the spire of St Vitus

Cathedral reached to trace along the low clouds. Overhead, sentinel

drones buzzed across rooftops, startling birds into flight or dawdling at

the mouths of alleyways.

It was snowing. It seemed to be Prague's permanent condition these

days, the only variation being the texture of the falls from the featureless

grey skies. Yan threw a glance up and blinked in the directionless,

attenuated sunshine. Today the wisps of snow were sporadic and lazy,

the wind nudging them on cold little gusts that nipped at his heels. Yan

took a roundabout course, walking into the New Town so he could pass

Nyjtta's gallery. He walked slowly and deliberately, not trying to be obvious about it. Through the window, barely visible, he could just see

the nondescript landscape she had agreed to show for him.

It wasn't his best work. Something he'd done a while ago, inspired by the Radiance school and Teft's Anarcho-Pointilist works. Nyjtta took it with one of those airy sighs of hers, and Yan had the impression that she was doing it as some sort of community service. She'd sold things for digital artists on the fringe in the past, but he had never been able to shake the memory of something Leaux had told him in the middle of a drunken rant. According to the poet, Nyjtta picked pity cases at random and gave them donations under the guise of purchases before discarding the art they gave her. Yan wanted to believe that Leaux was just bitter — and he was, to be certain — but he couldn't escape the fear that he might be right as well.

With this morose thought clinging to him like the stink of cigarette smoke, Yan found his way to The Sparrow and bowed his head to enter the pub. Some of the snow followed him inside and settled on the threshold.

Kurtis threw him a boozy wink as Yan sat down with a bottle of beer. He got a wan smile from Marie. Leaux, as he expected, ignored him,

continuing the diatribe he was directing at poor, mousy Nils.

‘You lack the understanding of the realities of this community,’ Leaux said, gesturing with a glass of that poisonous red wine he favoured. ‘Until you’re starving, you’ll never know it.’

Nils looked at the floor. He had a wealthy, doting mother in the country, and there was nothing Leaux liked more than beating him with that fact. Yan thought Nils was good, if rather bland company, and attributed his lack of success to his paucity of talent, rather than the fact he could afford to pay his rent. Like Yan, Nils and Marie were also artists, although their disciplines varied. Only Leaux, the self-styled lyricist, and Kurds, the struggling actor, moved in different circles.

Marie took Yan’s arrival as an opportunity to change the tack of a conversation that had clearly been boring everyone. ‘The gallant hero of Nove Mesto returns. What noble deeds have you done today, Yan? Cats rescued from trees? Old women escorted across the road?’

Yan took a pull from his beer and grimaced. His hope that news of the business with the girl wouldn’t reach The Sparrow had been naive.

‘What’s this?’ asked Kurtis. ‘I’m the gallant one hereabouts.’

Leaux made a mocking noise and rolled his eyes. Nils copied him, in hopes of deflecting interest from his shortcomings.

Tan saved someone’s life,’ Marie continued, breathlessly playing into

the role. ‘Rescued a stray girl from freezing to death.’

‘ *Rescue*?’ echoed Leaux. ‘Is that what they’re calling it these days?’

‘Don’t be coarse,’ snapped Kurtis. ‘Is this true?’

He nodded. ‘Marie, as ever, is being overly dramatic. I helped out a girl. She was lost and confused. She had no credits or ident, she was crying... What was I supposed to have done?’

Leaux snorted. ‘Don’t you know a scam when you see one? Tell me you weren’t stupid enough to give her any money.’

‘I let her stay at my place —’

The poet roared with harsh laughter. ‘Is it still there? If you left her alone, she’ll have taken everything of value by now! Not that you have anything worth stealing.’

Marie shook her head. ‘Leaux, not everyone lives in a world as bankrupt and heartless as yours. I think Yan was quite noble.’ A thought occurred to her and she eyed him. ‘You *were* noble, weren’t you? Taking advantage —’

‘I did not,’ Yan said flatly. ‘She sleeps in the tent, I sit in the annex. All I’ve done is...’ He gestured lamely. ‘I’m drawing her.’

‘Pervert,’ mumbled Leaux.

‘Can we see?’ asked Nils. Reluctantly, Yan produced the small pad of his sketcher and opened the memory. The drawing was loose and

unkempt, but the core of the girl's essence was there. Yan smiled as he looked at it, pleased with himself for capturing her as well as he had. 'I don't think she's a local,' Nils observed, attempting to sound knowledgeable.

'She's English,' said Yan. 'She has an educated accent.'

Marie took the pad and frowned. 'Huh. Not my type. Too boyish.'

'Your tastes are so base,' sniffed Kurds, leaning in to look. 'That's a classical face. Aphrodite and Athena.' He nodded sagely. 'Nice work, Yan. You have her spirit there. The truth of her.'

Nils nodded. 'Yes, I see that now.'

'Art is never about truth,' shot Leaux.

Kurds's lip curled. 'You have no soul, you hack. Art is truth. That's a universal reality. Yan understands: truth is the first duty of an artist.' He grinned at his statement. 'So, what's her name?'

A blink of memory from that night stabbed through him. The girl's eyes frill of tears and fear, desperate for help. Reaching for him.

What's your name?

I don't remember!

Yan blinked. 'Libuse,' he said quickly. 'She's called Libuse.' Leaux snorted again. 'Oh, how arch. Hardly very English.'

'Princess Libuse,' Marie smiled. 'You picked that out for her, did you? Yan, you are such a romantic. Does she know you named her after a mythological psychic?'

Kurtis waggled a stern finger in the woman's face. 'Have a care, girl. This city wouldn't exist if not for Libuse. Her tribe founded it 13 centuries ago! Without her, you'd have nowhere to put those sculptures of yours.'

'I am surrounded by soft-brained children,' declared Leaux as he leaned back and drained his glass.

'Don't you have some doggerel to scratch out?' Yan retorted, his tolerance thinning. 'We're not all as self-obsessed as you.'

Leaux shrugged, letting the insult roll off him. 'If-you're so much the white knight, then why did you leave her all alone?' He leered. 'Afraid that you might let those sketching fingers walk where they shouldn't?' The accusation cut closer to the truth than Yan would have liked, and he covered it with another swig of beer. Yan wanted to leave then and there, but that would have meant Leaux would score his point, so the artist stayed on as the evening drifted forward.

It was dark by the time he departed, and the snow was in flurry. Guilty and angry at himself, Yan walked as swiftly as he could along the cobbles. There was an impromptu installation going on with the aesthetic revolution crowd in Charles Square, a mix of agit-prop theatre and aural display. He gave them a wide berth and followed the road towards the Jirasek Bridge. The drifts of snow seemed more restless here, as if the

low wind was slinking close to the ground, gathering itself like a prowling

animal.

Yan was halfway across the street before he remembered that this

was where he had found her. There, just by the shuttered front of an old

toy store. Her crying had drawn him. The sound plucked at Yan's

emotions and he had been unable to ignore it. Strange, really. He had

lived in the city so long, he thought himself hardened to that sort of thing;

but the girl, *Libuse*... She had turned his head. She seemed so

uncommon, so different. A piece of Prague's puzzle, but with the colours

and shape all wrong.

A shadow moved in the toy shop's doorway and the sight of it made

Yan jump. A man in a dark frock coat stepped into the glow of the street

lamps with a confused air about him. On the one hand, he seemed wary

and nervous; on another, he was attempting to project a friendly, non-

threatening aspect. He waved at Yan and Yan found himself lamely

gesturing back. The man approached. At first glance he seemed like a

NeoGoth, but the hair was too curly and the clothes he wore too upbeat.

He had a device in his hand that was chiming softly.

'Good evening!' he began. *English*, said a voice in the back of Yan's

mind. 'I have a question that might seem a little odd to you.'

'I don't have any money,' Yan said by reflex, and got a quick smile in

return.

‘What’s the date?’

He blinked. ‘Uh. Tuesday. The twelfth, I think.’

The man made an expansive motion with his hands, shooting a glance over his shoulder. ‘And?’

‘And what?’ Yan’s brow furrowed.

‘Which year?’

A peculiar laugh bubbled up from his chest. ‘How can you not know what year it is?’

‘Occupational hazard,’ noted the man, glancing at the device with a furrowed brow. ‘Can you tell me?’

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Yan blinked. The question caught him off-balance, and suddenly the answer escaped him. *How odd*. He waved it away like a nagging insect.

‘I have to go. Excuse me…’

‘I’m looking for someone,’ called the man. ‘She might be nearby, but I can’t be sure.’ He gave a sheepish grin. ‘It’s rather difficult for me to get my bearings in here.’ He followed Yan a few steps as the wind began to pick up. ‘I could use a bit of help from someone with local knowledge.’

‘No.’ Yan walked quicker, resentment bubbling up inside him. Who was this tourist, lurking in side streets, trying to way-lay him? He turned,

a half-formed admonishment on his lips, but the breeze gusted with

abrupt violence and the flakes of snow took flight all around him. They

curled past Yan in long coils, forming into tendrils of drifting motes. He

halted, amazed by the peculiar motion. The gusts moved almost as if

they were directed, in hazy swarms. They turned in eddies of air; and

then with swift intent the snows struck at the man. He yelped and dodged

to one side, his boots skipping across the pavement. The snow turned

again and made for him, defying gravity and nature.

‘I’ve outstayed my welcome!’ gritted the man and he dashed into an

alley. The flakes became a rippling wave crest over the cobbles and

chased him in. Yan followed, unable to take his eyes from the ridiculous

pursuit. He heard a heavy thud of displaced air, and came to the mouth

of the passageway. It ended a few feet away in a high, unscalable brick

wall. The snow had settled in a thick drift, and of the stranger there was

no sign. Yan gingerly pressed at the mass of white with the toe of his

shoe, unsettled by the bizarre encounter.

Libuse was still sleeping when he got back to the bubbletent, and so

with care he activated the lantern and sketched. For a while he tried to

render the countenance of the man in the snow, but a proper definition of

the face eluded him. Thinking about the incident on the street made him

feel uneasy. Eventually, he opened up the picture of the girl and returned

to it, adding in layers of detail, colour, depth.

He looked up to fix the tone of her cheeks and found her watching

him. Yan blushed; he instantly felt invasive. ‘I’m sorry,’ he managed. ‘I

was just...’

‘I’d like to see,’ she said, holding out a hand.

He didn’t give her the sketcher, just turned it around to show her.

‘You’re a good subject.’

She smiled, pulling the blanket to her neck and sitting up. ‘I don’t think

I’m as pretty as you make me.’

‘You’re wrong. I can barely do justice to you.’ The words fell from his

lips, and his colour deepened. He hadn’t meant to say something so

foolish; at least, not so soon. But she didn’t appear to mind.

By degrees, the smile faded from her face. She was lost in thought.

Yan had made tea and he presented her with a cup. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t know who I am,’ she replied, her voice catching. ‘I can feel it at

the edges of my thoughts, but it’s like smoke. Every time I try to catch it

in my hands, it disappears...’ She stifled a sob. ‘It feels as if there should

be someone here with me, but I don’t know who that is. All I can see

are

blinks of things. Pictures that don't seem to connect to one another.'

'Pictures of what?' Yan sat next to her and put a comforting hand on hers. 'Tell me what they are. I'll draw them for you.'

Will that help?' She was morose.

'It might. If we tease them out, perhaps they won't bother you any more.' He licked his lips nervously, and finally said the words he had been holding in since that night. 'You inspire me, Libuse. Together we might create something incredible.'

So she told him, and he drew.

In all honesty, he had been in a fallow period for too long, the motile pixel- canvases scattered about his small habitat untidy with unfinished

daubs and half-realised images. The girl, falling into his life from nowhere, her arrival had rekindled something of the talent that had burned low in Yan.

It began with the pictures of her, and it grew into the pictures of her dreams. She had broken stories about incredible things; living houses and airships, tales of phantoms and drowned cities. Yan made them real,

drew them out of her and let Libuse forget the dark emotions that plagued her sleep. He was kind to her, and she was lonely; things progressed as Yan hoped they would. That evening they kissed for the first time, and eventually they moved on to sharing the bed. At night he

would stay awake for hours to listen to her dreaming. She was an empty

vessel and yet she was full to the brim with life and intelligence.

Sometimes Yan thought of Libuse like a mirror for his emotions, his

dreams and desires. Without even trying, he let himself fall for her, and in

turn she held on to him, her rock in a shifting world she was learning

anew. Days turned to weeks turned to months; and eventually it seemed

as if she had always been there.

Nyjtta folded her arms and frowned out the window at the snowstorm.

'If this doesn't clear, no one will come.' The owner's blonde hair was a

curtain over her tight-lipped expression. 'This is an important evening.'

Yan nodded gently, spotting the landscape hanging discreetly in a

shaded corner. All this time, and still she hadn't sold it — or pretended to

have sold it. It was an afterthought among the other art he had created,

the abstracts Libuse had spurred from him. Tonight Nyjtta's gallery was

only hosting pieces from Yan. It was hard to believe how fast things had

changed; the first sale had been the *Dead Venice* triptych, then *Shadow*

of Grove and *Falling Triad*. Soon Yan was in the moment and being

spoken of outside the normal fringes of the community. He was

happening, so they said. At last, when he presented *One-Oh-One* to Nyjtta, the woman took him aside and talked of ‘an opening’. Libuse was happy for him, and with the money he bought her better clothes and left the bubbletent behind for a nice rental in Old Town.

Marie and Kurtis were happy for him too. Nils seemed confused about the whole thing and predictably Leaux made comments about the passing fancies of fools. He predicted that Yan’s lack of talent would become obvious soon enough, even to the most jaded of Prague’s bored intelligentsia. In turn, Libuse had told Leaux to go choke on his pen.

Marie, especially, had warmed to the girl. Yan didn’t have the full measure of it, but he saw a sisterly connection between the two women.

Libuse laughed when she was with Marie, and to Yan that was music.

To Nyjtta’s relief, people began to trickle in, despite the pulsing gusts of wind that hurled wads of snowflakes up and down the boulevard. She had spiced wine on hand and the visitors took it with gusto. Yan lurked at the back, close to the installation room’s doors in case he felt the need to retreat from all the attention. From his vantage point he listened to people make small talk, and tried hard not to hope for compliments. He spied Kurtis and the others, tittering and telling jokes. Libuse was there,

and she ran a hand through her hair as she sipped at a drink. Yan enjoyed the moment, watching her from a distance. My muse, he reflected. She's the only real work of art here.

When he saw Leaux enter the gallery in a scowling, disdainful temper, Yan retreated into the darkened room and let it swallow him. He was being pulled in two directions, wanting to be here and wanting to be elsewhere. The door closed of its own accord and he shivered. Yan looked up at the skylight in the roof. The panes of glass were being buffeted by bolts of snow that bumped at the frame. He frowned. The weather was the worst it had been in years, that was something that everyone agreed on. Yan couldn't recall a time when the drifts had laid so thickly along the Milady Horákové and over the rooftops of the Jewish Quarter. He hadn't seen the grass in Petrin Park for ages.

But the past seemed to be out of focus, indistinct. Yan's memories slid away from him, they kept out of reach. He smiled slightly. It was one of the things he loved so much about Libuse, the way that she remembered so strongly — even the little things, like the way he took his tea or the arrangement of the papers on his desk. There was the sound of a chime at the edge of his hearing, and all at once Yan's mood shifted.

There was someone in the room with him.

'Hello again.' The man in the frock coat emerged from the shadows.

‘Did I frighten you? I’m so sorry.’

Yan backed away a step, warding him off with his empty wine glass.

‘What are you doing here? This is a private opening!’

He smiled sheepishly. ‘I admit it, I’m gate-crashing. It’s all in a good

cause, though.’ The man had the device in his hand, the same one he’d

been holding on the street. In the weak light from the window in the roof,

he realised the man was wearing exactly the same clothes. ‘I think we

got off on the wrong foot last time.’ He extended a hand. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

Tan Periko.’ He didn’t return the gesture, and the Doctor person

withdrew awkwardly, covering it with a nod to a poster advertising the

opening.

‘So this is your big day, then? Well, good for you. I’ve always been a

patron of the arts, when I can be. I have a gallery of my own, actually.’

‘Indeed?’ Yan remained unconvinced, weighing the prospect of a

shout for security; but then did he really want a scene here, tonight of all

nights? There was a heavy rattle from the skylight and both of them

looked up.

Snowfall continued to creep over the glass.

‘Terrible weather these days,’ remarked the Doctor, and he retreated

a little, a note of concern in his words.

‘It’s never been this cold,’ Yan admitted. ‘There are ice plates floating on the Vltava. The blizzard falls but it never seems to settle.’

‘Have you ever seen a snow globe?’ The Doctor made a spherical shape with his fingers and mimed rocking it. ‘It falls forever in there. That’s going to happen here too, unless I can stop it.’

Yan frowned, irritated that this interloper was drawing him away from his questions. ‘You’re going to have to leave if you don’t have an invitation.’

The Doctor peered at the device. ‘Maybe I want to buy a piece.’ He gestured to a pixel-canvas resting on the table, an item left aside for fear of crowding out the other, more serene works. ‘What’s that one called?’

‘ *Face of Grail*. Look, I’m going to have to ask you to leave —’

The other man held up his hands. ‘All right, Yan, look. I’ll be honest with you. I need your help to find a friend. I know you’ve been close to her...’ He waved the chiming box and the sound rose when he aimed it in the artist’s direction. ‘Her name is Charley Pollard and she’s lost. She isn’t supposed to be in this place. I’ve got to take her away.’ The Doctor peered past him, to the door and the gallery proper beyond it. ‘If I can just—’

‘No!’ snapped Yan with abrupt ferocity. ‘I don’t know any "Charley", and I don’t know you!’ Anger flooded through him from an unknown,

powerful source.

‘Yan, please, I’m not going to hurt her, if that’s what you think.’

‘No!’ He shouted this time, and his words were echoed with a cracking snap of stressed glass.

Tan, if she stays in here it will be bad for her and worse for everyone else!’ Whatever more he was going to say was drowned out as the skylight imploded into the room, scattering fragments across the floor.

Yan stumbled back in time to see a column of shivering white motes reach down through the broken window on a tide of icy wind. The snow

became a fuzzy-edged claw that spun and flailed around the room, surging at the Doctor. Yan fled through the door, throwing himself back into the gallery.

People were crowded out there, drawn by the sound. Yan collided with Kurtis’s chest and the actor caught him. ‘Are you all right? What the hell is going on back there?’

He heard Leaux make a derisive noise. ‘A poor play at a dramatic entrance, if you ask me.’

Nyjtta and one of her assistants dithered at the edge of the doorway.

‘The roof!’ she cried, pointing at the ragged skylight. ‘It collapsed...’

‘He was...’ Yan threw a look over his shoulder. ‘In there, I don’t...’ He panted, his thoughts whirling. ‘The Doctor...’

‘Who?’ Libuse pushed her way through the people towards him, with

Marie close behind. Worry marred her face. Tan, are you hurt?’ She

touched delicately at a small cut on his forehead. Was there someone in

there with you?’

‘No,’ he said quickly, his eyes never leaving hers. ‘No, it was the

snow.’ Kurtis nodded sagely. ‘Yes, of course. All the foul weather we’ve

been having recently, it must have piled up on the skylight. The weight

was too much for it.’

Yan nodded. ‘That was it. I’m fine, fine. Just a bit surprised, that’s all.’

Nyjtta’s assistant emerged from the back room. Tit of a mess in there,

but it doesn’t seem like any pieces were damaged.’

The owner clapped her hands together. ‘What excitement!’ she said

brightly, turning the moment to her advantage and addressing the

gathering. ‘I assure you all, the snow and the wind won’t affect the rest of

the opening! As I have everyone’s attention, perhaps now I should

introduce the young man whose startling compositions have taken

Prague by, uh, storm!’

Polite laughter followed. Yan let Nyjtta guide him into the gallery while

her assistant moved to lock the door to the installation room behind him.

‘My friends,’ announced Nyjtta. ‘May I present Yan Periko!’

He nodded into the ripple of applause, sparing a last look at the

darkened room. In the glow spilling from the ruptured skylight, he could

see it was empty but for some scattered furniture and patches of white.

The ride back to the apartment took twice as long as usual, the

taxibot driving at a sluggish pace over the streets to avoid any chance of

skids caused by invisible rimes of black ice. These days, it seemed like

the polar chill was a permanent fixture, and Yan's thoughts turned foggy

when he tried to recall sun and summer. He watched thick snowflakes

batter against the windscreen while the cab slowly negotiated the turning

near the Metro.

Libuse's hand found his. Tan, tell me what's wrong. This was a

fantastic night for you, but you seem so withdrawn.' She leaned closer.

'Talk to me.'

'It's just... That accident, with the window.' He covered with a wan

smile. 'It scared me more than I realised.'

She watched him. 'I thought I heard you say there was someone

else.'

'Just shadows on the walls,' he replied. 'Tricks of the light.' Yon

sighed and marshalled his thoughts. 'I think... The glass and everything,

it just made me afraid. If something happened... If I lost you, say... I

don't

know what I'd do.'

Her smile faltered. Tan, we've talked about this before.'

'It's just —' he turned to her with new intensity you're special, Libuse.

You've unlocked something in me, you made me whole. I don't want

that to disappear.'

She looked away and his heart sank. He could read the thoughts on

her face.

Yan pushed on. 'I know you have questions about the memories

you've lost. I understand. But here, we have something unique. Your

past might have gone for a good reason! It's like we've both been given a

clean slate to begin again, you with your life, me with my art...' He

squeezed her hand and the words came. 'I love you, Libuse. I knew it

from the moment I first saw you.'

Tan, I don't know —'

He silenced her with a look. 'You don't have to say it to me. I won't

ask you to, but I want you to understand how I feel.'

The taxi rocked to a halt and the door opened, letting in the cold.

'I don't want to lose you,' he told her, and after a long moment she

nodded back, tears caught at the corners of her eyes.

She slept and he drew her.

He should have been working on a new piece, a lenticular

chiaroscuro with the working title of *Hell Fire*, but she was the subject he

continued to return to, as the numerous portraits and sketches of her dotted about his studio attested. In waking hours, she would talk and every word she said seemed to spark an idea in him. But at night, Yan went back to his first connection to her, to the drawings.

She murmured and turned under the sheets. Yan edged from his chair and whispered, 'Libuse?'

The woman gave no response, snoring very softly. Yan paused and put down his stylus. He leaned closer to her and licked his lips. Say it, a voice in his head commanded, say it. The name pushed at his lips, and he clamped his jaw shut. He didn't want to know if it was true, he didn't want to chance it. But if he never said it, he would always be doubting and the strange appearances of the long-haired man would go on and on. He knew that for certain.

With care, Yan took a breath. 'Charley?'

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She shifted, turning dreamily towards him, still deep in her slumber.

'Doctor?' she slurred. 'Where are we?'

In the next instant, Yan found himself in the bathroom, clinging to the sink and shuddering. He couldn't look in the mirror. 'No,' he said aloud.

'No. I won't have it. She's *mine*.'

It was weeks later when Marie crossed paths with him in The Sparrow. She made straight for his table and he knew that it had been

a

mistake to come to the pub. He had hoped that during the day it would

have been empty of anyone who knew him, that he could have found

some solace and time to think — but his luck had run thin.

Marie sat down heavily, without taking off the voluminous coat and

hat she wore. She even retained the gloves, gripping a steaming glass of

hot tea. Her cheeks were red from the cold; even in The Sparrow, the

heaters laboured to make the place liveable.

‘Didn’t see you come in,’ he offered.

Marie jerked a thumb at the windows, each of them so rimed with

frost that the street outside was only a blur of shapes and colours. ‘You

can’t see anything out there except your breath freezing in front of your

face.’ She sipped the tea. ‘You’ve been absent recently.’

‘Busy.’ He shifted his cup.

‘And Libuse. Where have you been keeping her?’

Yan’s head snapped up. ‘I don’t *keep* her! What are you implying?’

‘It’s just a figure of speech, Yan.’ Marie frowned at him. ‘With this

cold, it’s no wonder I haven’t seen her out and about…’

He stared at the tabletop. ‘She still doesn’t know her way around. I

didn’t think it was safe for her to be wandering the city in the dead of

winter.’

Marie gave a crooked smile. ‘So you *are* keeping her, then? I imagine

she’s not happy about that.’

‘I’m not holding her prisoner!’ he retorted hotly. ‘Libuse is free to...

To...’

‘To go?’ Marie finished. ‘And if she wanted to, would you let her? I’ve

seen how you look at her. The girl’s not made of spun glass, you know.

She’s not as fragile as you think.’

Yan shot her a glare. ‘Don’t think that your relationships with women

have any bearing on mine!’ He regretted the words the moment he said

them, but it was too late.

‘Oh.’ Marie leaned back. ‘I see. Pardon me. I thought I was just

showing concern for my friends. Perhaps I should go.’

‘No.’ Yan sighed. ‘Please don’t. I’m sorry. It’s just that recently things

have been very confusing for me.’

‘Confusing,’ repeated Marie in a dour voice. ‘You’re more successful

than you’ve ever been, you have a warm flat and a girl who cares about

you, and you’re confused. Any one of us would be happy to have that.’

Tut I’m not,’ he replied. ‘She doesn’t. It’s a lie, Marie. All made of

paper, with a match to it.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Yan stared at the cracked tabletop. ‘I think I know who Libuse is, but

I’m terrified that if I tell her, she’ll leave and never come back.’

Marie was quiet for some time, sympathy and anger warring across her expression. At length, she composed a metered reply. ‘Do you love her, Yan? Honestly and truly, not as just some fantasy?’

‘There’s no doubt in my mind.’

She eyed him. ‘If she stopped telling you those stories, if she gave you no more things to paint and draw, would you still love her then? If all the trappings of your popularity went away, would you still feel that way?’

He answered without hesitating. ‘Yes. How could you ask me that? I’ve never known anyone like her. She completes me. She’s my muse, my art living and breathing…’

Marie sighed. Tan, you are my oldest and dearest friend, and I wouldn’t hurt you… But you must know she doesn’t feel the same way.

Tell me you’re not that blind.’

‘No.’ He put the cup down hard. ‘She just needs time, that’s all. Char—’ He halted, frowning at his mistake. ‘Libuse could learn to care for me, if she lets go of what she’s lost.’

The woman had noticed his slip of the tongue. ‘What’s her real name, Yan? How did you find out?’

Eventually he told her about the man, the Doctor. Marie raised her eyebrows in silent reproach when he spoke about the strange business of the snows, the changeless man’s vanishing from blind alleys and locked rooms. Yan’s voice began to tremble as he brought the story to a

close. ‘He’ll take her from me. I know it.’

She drained her drink. ‘Do you remember what Kurtis said? "Truth is the first duty of the artist." You’re letting your fears make you a liar.’ She leaned closer. 'Libuse, or Charley, or whoever she is, she’s not yours to control. When she finds out you’ve kept this from her, she will hate you.’

‘You won’t tell her!’ Yan snapped, panic rising.

‘No,’ Marie shook her head. ‘But *you* will, in the long run. I know you, Yan. Eventually, months or years from now, you’ll crack under the strain of lying and blurt it all out. The longer you leave it, the worse it will get.’

He was shaking his head. ‘I can’t be my best without her!’

‘That’s an excuse. You’re tormenting her every day that girl lives with half her life missing, and you do it because you’re afraid —’

The pub’s door banged open with the wind and a draught of chilling air flooded in, prickling Yan’s bare skin like needles. Kurtis and Leaux forced their way in, stamping their feet to dislodge clots of ice. Both men were pale, and not from the cold. The actor and the poet crossed to them and Yan noted with quiet alarm that Leaux’s face was puffy, as if he had been crying.

Marie saw it too, and for the moment their conversation was forgotten.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nils is dead,’ said Kurtis, with stony gravitas.

Yan’s hand flew to his mouth in shock. ‘How?’

‘Buried alive. Crushed.’ Leaux’s voice was brittle. ‘Poor fool. He… The blizzards…’

‘A freak flurry from the rooftops,’ explained Kurtis. ‘He was beneath it, with a dozen other people. An avalanche, they’re calling it. An avalanche in the middle of Prague!’

The poet blinked furiously. ‘Damn him for making me upset. Damn little fool. Damn this stinking weather!’

Yan looked to Marie, remembering the Doctor’s offhand comment in the gallery. He thought of snows that fell forever and a deeper chill ran through him.

‘I didn’t think you liked him,’ ventured the woman. Leaux shot her an acid glare but didn’t reply.

‘This climate will be the death of us all,’ noted Kurtis. ‘People want to leave the city but they can’t because the railway lines are brittle with cold, the roads blocked. Even the river is frozen. And this blasted snowfall!’ He tapped Yan in the chest with a thick finger. ‘You shouldn’t be here, lad. You should be with your girl, keeping her warm!’

‘Yes.’ Yan pushed back and stood up. ‘You’re right.’ He looked at Marie as he answered. ‘I have to go.’

He hadn't seen a taxi for days, or any other kind of municipal vehicle for that matter. The streets were rumpled carpets of dirty grey ice and wintry slush, and at every intersection bitter winds seemed to come from every direction at once, buffeting Yan and forcing him to bend low against them. Once or twice he lost his bearings, so thick were the flurries that he found it hard to see the street signs. He doubled back around the museum, collar pulled tight and head down. It was a shock when he almost collided with the small shed in the centre of Wenceslas Square, and Yan's arms extended out and flapped at the air as he tried not to fall over.

By rights there should have been nothing but a traffic island here but there was a small blue kiosk, spilling weak light from a set of barred windows. He placed a hand on it to steady himself and felt warmth. Yan looked the thing up and down. There was no snow on it, not a single flake.

And somehow he wasn't at all surprised when the door opened a crack to show the face of the long-haired man. 'Ah, good. You're here,' said the Doctor. 'Come on in. I have tea brewing.'

An odd tingling crawled all over him as Yan went inside. He fought down the urge to scratch and peered into the gloomy corners of the

space inside the kiosk. The Doctor nodded to an overstuffed seat.

‘Make yourself comfortable. The sensation will pass in a moment or two; it’s just the TARDIS adjusting to your arrival.’

‘TARDIS?’ The word had a strange shape in Yan’s mouth, and it made his lips twitch in a half-smile. *TARDIS*. He would remember it, use it for a title perhaps. He swung his gaze around the strange room. It was gothic and vaulted, steel and wood with peculiar anachronistic constructs of crystal and gleaming brass, in the middle an angular dais of some sort. The shapes put off his depth perception, making the dimensions seem irregular. ‘Is this your gallery? Some sort of *trompe l’oeil*?’

The Doctor showed a brief, flat grin. ‘Yes, that type of thing.’ He returned from around the dais with the chiming box. It was chattering more loudly than before. The amusement faded away. ‘Oh, dear. The comparative passage of time inside and outside is varying more than I expected.’ He glanced up. ‘When did we last speak?’

‘A few weeks ago, perhaps. A month? I don’t recall.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor came closer. ‘Don’t you think that’s odd, Yan? That you can’t remember the date?’

‘It’s not important.’

‘No? Let me ask you this, then. Think hard, now. Can you remember a day when it wasn’t snowing?’

‘This is the worst weather the city has ever had —’

‘That’s not what I asked you. I’m talking about a day when it rained, or

when it was brilliant sunshine.’

Yan snorted. ‘Some days are like that.’

‘When?’ demanded the Doctor. ‘Name one. Tell me what happened on that day. Where were you? Who did you meet? Where did you go on that sunny afternoon?’

He blinked. ‘I_ I can’t think of one off-hand. I don’t see why you care about something so trivial.’

The Doctor fixed him with a steady eye. ‘You only think it’s trivial because you’ve never experienced it, Yan. No one in this city has. You’ve never known a day without the snows.’

‘That’s insane.’ He shook his head. ‘And you! Where did you go to, in the alley and the gallery? How did you disappear like that?’

‘I was never really there, not a hundred per cent. You just saw a projection, really. A fraction of the real me. That’s why I couldn’t interact for more than a few minutes. The caretakers saw the anomaly and came to remove me.’

‘Caretakers?’

He gestured to the air. ‘The snow: it’s a nanomolecular construct; it maintains the parity of the gallery... um, that is, the city.’

Yan hesitated by the chair. ‘The only word in that sentence that meant anything to me was "snow". I want some rational answers from you!’

The Doctor glanced at the device in his hand and pocketed it. ‘I can give you all the answers that you want, Yan, but you won’t be able to un-hear them. The truth can be a dangerous thing, if you’re not ready for it.’

‘I’m not afraid of the truth!’

He reached for a lever on the dais. ‘Let’s see.’

The world lurched; Yan’s nerves turned to fire; and then the sensation was gone and he was —

— scratching at the prickly tingling again. ‘What was that?’

‘A sidestep,’ said the Doctor, moving past him to the doors. ‘Be careful when you go outside. You’re not supposed to be here.’

Yan walked out of the kiosk and found himself inside a vast hive made of spheres, vanishing away above, below, to right and left, off to the line of infinity. He stumbled and caught himself on a ceramic railing the texture of tooth enamel. The artist’s stomach rebelled at the sight before him. They were on a vast curving balcony that hung without visible means of suspension before an impossible wall of shimmering glass globes. The TARDIS was beside them, resting on a shallow pad.

‘Have you drugged me?’ Yan blurted. ‘Is that what this is?’ The sights made him reel.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Don’t look for a horizon line. That’s what’s making you feel sick. Breathe steadily and keep your eyes on the

balcony. Michio-dimensional space isn't really suited to human perceptions.' He sighed. 'I knew that. I shouldn't have brought Charley here.'

Yan gulped air and stared at his feet. The electric, crawling sensation was all over him. 'What is this place?'

'I suppose *gallery* is the best description. This is a forced m-brane event coalescence...' He must have seen the colour drain from Yan's face and shook his head again. 'Answers, yes. From your perspective, about a trillion years into the future, a race of aliens built this place as an art repository. They regard architecture as the highest form of artistic expression, you see, so they don't hang paintings or display sculpture. They show cities.'

Yan hazarded a look at one of the spheres and inside he saw strange bone towers and bridges made of sinew. There were things moving around in there, things with ant-like bodies and heads of tentacles.

'First Metropolis of the G'!qu,' said the Doctor. He leaned back and pointed out other globes. 'There's Miracle City, the Korpa Citadelic, High Pergamon, Atlantis...'

But Yan wasn't following him. His eyes had fallen to the sphere directly beneath them. 'Prague,' he added. 'I can see it in there. There's the observation tower, the cathedral.'

'They didn't steal them, nothing nasty like that. They just patterned them. Stopped off with their caretaker mites and made a copy, then

put

them here inside their own snow globes.'

Yan's heart was hammering at his chest, his mind reeling. 'Why are you showing me this, telling me this mad story?'

'You wanted answers. And I want Charley back.' He sighed. 'She fell in, for want of a better term. I think the patterning got confused by her, because she's an Earthborn human and it must have seemed to them that she matches the city. But she doesn't fit in there.'

'She doesn't remember,' Yan breathed.

'Yes, amnesia is a side effect. The caretakers can't assimilate her, and it's confusing their programming, which is why they're reproducing so much. The snows are getting thicker, and they'll keep doing it until they smother the whole city unless we get Charley out.'

Yan thought of Nils, crushed beneath the blizzard. 'If you can go back and forward with this box, then why haven't you got her already?'

'I told you before, I can't actually *be* there. Not one hundred per cent. It took all my skill just to get the TARDIS inside, and even then I couldn't leave it. I had to wait for you to come to me.'

The artist shook his head. 'You expect me to believe this lunacy? It doesn't make any sense! If I was living in there...' He stabbed a finger at the sphere. 'I would know it! We would know if we were trapped

inside

some gigantic art exhibit!'

'Would you?' The Doctor watched him steadily. Tan Periko, the

pattern of the artist, would he know? Or would the caretakers make sure

he never thought about that? Make it so that one day seemed like any

other, that months and years didn't matter? A dash of winter, frozen in

place?'

'I am Yan Periko!' he shouted. 'L.' He caught sight of the glass orb

and his words died in his throat. 'Is that all we are?' He husked.

'Puppets? How can I be here, outside it, if that is true?'

The Doctor waved the device at him. 'I modified this — changed the

polarity, so to speak. I brought you out. That's the strange tingle you can

feel. This reality isn't attuned to you.'

'If she goes, I'll have nothing!' he snapped. It was strange; he found

he didn't care if his life was a simulation. He only cared about her.

'If she stays, she won't survive. Nothing in there will.'

The crushing truth of the revelation forced Yan to the floor. 'Libuse...

She belongs here as much as I belong in there.'

'Libuse?'

He gave a hollow chuckle. 'The name I gave Charley on the night I

found her. It's from fairy stories: Libuse, the seer princess of the tribes

that built the settlement that became Prague. They said she saw

tomorrow in her waking dreams. She told her people that ours was a

city
that would one day reach the stars.'
'She was right. This gallery is millions of light years from Earth.'
He was silent for a moment. 'What happens if I go back after seeing

all this? Will these caretakers allow it?'
'What you do with the truth is up to you. I'm only showing you this so you understand how to save Charley's life. She'll freeze to death along with the whole city unless you bring her to the TARDIS.' The Doctor rested a hand on his shoulder. 'I can't abandon her, Yan. She's very special to me. I know you feel the same way about her.'
And then he knew that the choice he thought he had was nothing more than an illusion, a thin sketch of what was real, of what really mattered. The artist got to his feet. 'Take me back.'

When she woke, he was sketching. Yan smiled at her and she returned it, but her face shifted when she saw the sadness in his eyes.
'Something's wrong.'
'Yes,' he agreed, 'but we're going to fix it.' He turned the sketcher to show the beginnings of a new work. 'Do you know what this is?'
She studied the art. 'I've seen this before. Like a huge glass ball, filled with snowflakes...' She gasped. 'I *remember* it!'
'Good,' Yan replied, his voice catching. 'Come on, get your coat.'

The blizzard was roaring through the streets by the time they reached

the boulevard. Yan had held out one tiny, final strand of hope that this all

might be a wild dream until the moment he saw her lay eyes on the blue

kiosk. The moment of glorious recognition on her face severed it, and in

that instant he knew that everything the Doctor had shown him was real.

The door of the TARDIS was open. Yan stepped away from her.

‘You should go inside, Charley. It’s too cold out here.’

‘What did you call me?’

He kissed her for the last time. ‘You have a friend waiting.’

‘You’re not coming?’

‘No.’ Yan fished in his pocket and handed her a sheet of pixel-canvas. She unfolded it and saw her own face staring back up at her. ‘This is you, Charlotte Pollard,’ he told her. ‘This is how beautiful you are. It’s how much I love you.’

He waited until the machine faded into the darkness and then took a seat on a street bench. As the sun came up and the snow began to run to melt water, Yan sketched his city and the people in it, drawing the truth wherever he saw it.

The Time Eater

Lee Battersby

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,

with Jamie McCrimmon

The sewers were hundreds of years old, and had known perhaps three dozen sets of footsteps. The combined effluent of centuries flowed in muddy streams through its brick tributaries, and the smell... well, the smell was what Jamie McCrimmon had come to expect from cities and holes in the ground. He trudged through the underground maze, barely daring to breathe as he watched the Doctor skip ahead of him like a demented tramp, twirling a small recorder between his fingers.

'All I'm saying,' said Jamie, stopping to sweep his arms around the dark space, 'is that you promised me two weeks on a mountainside. And from where I'm standing, I don't think you've quite lived up to your promise, have you?'

'Jamie...' The Doctor smiled. 'It's a minor miscalculation, that's all. We'll be out of here in a jiffy. Just as soon as...'

'You not saying we're still lost?'

'Oh, no. No, no. Misaligned.' The Doctor glanced from side to side, one edge of his lower lip gripped between his teeth. 'Astray, maybe. This

way!' He pointed to an anonymous branch and strode forwards. Jamie groaned and followed him.

'Do you not know where the TARDIS is at all?'

'Of course I do, Jamie.' The Doctor made a sudden turn, forcing Jamie to skid to a halt. A slosh of water followed him and washed over the young Scot's ankles, causing him to wrinkle his nose in disgust. 'I know exactly where she is. It's just I'm a little less certain of .. a-ha!' He raised the recorder above his head, pointing out a series of rust-brown rungs set into the wall. 'Here we are.'

'And where do they go?'

'Up, Jamie.' The Doctor smiled again, and gripped his recorder between his teeth like a pirate. 'Who wants to go first?' he rasped around its edges. Jamie sighed and closed his eyes. 'I'll go, shall I?'

'Oh, wonderful.' The Doctor skipped over to the rungs and bounced on his toes. 'Come on, then, let's not dawdle.'

Knowing there was little point in arguing, Jamie gripped the first rung and began to climb. He emerged onto a cobbled road in the glare of day.

By the time he had blinked the sunshine from his eyes, the Doctor was kneeling a few feet away, running his hands across the cobbles.

'Where are we?'

The Doctor rubbed fingers together. 'Granite, hand-carved, a fine layer of dung, hair, dirt... Jamie, I do believe we're in England!' He rose,

wiping his hands upon his trousers. ‘How delightful.’

‘Aye, but *where*?’

‘It’s obvious.’ The Doctor strode away down the street. ‘Stone construction, pre-industrial air, hand-thatched roofs, an identifiable architectural style. We’re in London, Jamie. I think it’s sometime in the 1850s. See —’ they reached the corner and he stretched up to tap a metal plate set into the brick building ‘— we’re down by the river, by the looks of it. Somewhere between Cloak Lane and —’ he read the sign ‘— Kaprova Street. Ah.’

‘So not London, then?’ Jamie asked with a smile.

‘Ah, no. Not quite.’ The Doctor brightened. ‘Prague! Oh, how lovely. We’re just down from the Old Town Square. You know, if this is the right year…’ He sucked a finger, and raised it into the air. ‘Oh, I think we are. I have a friend round here.’ He set off again, Jamie scurrying to keep up.

‘The Josefor is this way.’

‘The what?’

‘Jewish Quarter, Jamie. You know, the rabbi and I had *such* an astonishing escapade. Old Loew thought he’d discovered a golem, can you believe it? But it was a Hallanian. Here, of all places! Eremite Pharn

— no, Czarn. He'd crash-landed and lost his memory from the impact. Oh, goodness, the trouble he caused when the amnesia began to wear off. We only just managed to —'

'Doctor?'

'What is it?'

'What does one of these Hallanian things look like?'

'Ugly, Jamie, even for an Andromedan species. Looks just like a golem. Lumpish features, bald, short, very large...'

'Sort of a browny-grey colour?'

'Yes, I believe his exo-skeleton was... how did you guess that?'

Jamie turned the Doctor's shoulder so he saw the figure striding towards them along a side street. The approaching Hallanian hissed, and accelerated its pace. Spine-like wings began to unfurl from the creature's humped shoulders.

'Oh. Oh, dear!' The Doctor back-pedalled two steps, eyes fixed upon the raging alien. 'Quick, Jamie. This way!'

They ran towards the next corner, the Hallanian breaking into a run behind them.

'Can we not just stay and fight it?' Jamie gasped as they ran. The Doctor spared a glance over his shoulder.

'He'd kill you. Besides, it's not that. If Eremite Czarn is here then so am I, and if I meet myself in the same spatial coordinates there's no telling what damage that could do to the time stream. What we need to

do is get somewhere I never...'

'Doctor?'

He's turned the corner. Quickly, down here!'

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They rounded a nearby building and skidded onto Valentinska Street.

'If we can get to the Charles Bridge —'

The surface of the road under their feet had changed from coarse cobbles to the smooth, seamless pressure of tarmac. The Doctor stopped his headlong rush and looked down in confusion.

'They don't have this in 1606.'

'Do they have those?' Jamie slapped at the Doctor's shoulder, hard enough to cause him to look up.

'No,' he said slowly. 'They didn't have Russian tanks, Jamie.' The metal thing swivelled its turret towards them.

'Jamie, I think we should be leaving. Now.'

'What?' Jamie pointed at the Hallanian. 'Back towards that beastie?'

'Yes, Jamie. We don't have a choice!'

They dove round the edge of the building as the massive barrel of the tank's gun took aim. A wall of air chased them, the boom of a fired shot

hard in its wake. Both men hit the ground —Jamie pressed himself into

the base of the wall, hands pressed over his ears.

Nothing happened. No impact shuddered the world. After a few moments, Jamie risked a peek at the Doctor, who responded by

removing his hands from his head. He sat back against the wall and swivelled his head from side to side, taking in the lack of damage around them.

'That's very odd,' he said, raising himself to his knees. 'That shot should have taken the whole wall down.' He grabbed at Jamie's shoulder. 'Come on, up you get.'

The Doctor jumped to his feet and slowly tilted his head round the corner to look at the street they had just left. Jamie remained flat on the ground, his voice muffled by the proximity of cobblestone.

'Where's that beastie of yours got to, Doctor?'

'Oh, never mind that,' the Doctor replied, stepping out into the middle of the street. 'More importantly, where's the tank? Come to that, where's Valentinska Street?'

'What are you on about?' Jamie joined the Doctor and realised where they where. 'This isn't the same street.'

'No, no, it is.' The Doctor sniffed the air. 'Just not the same time. You know, there really is something very odd here.' He drew a small leather-bound book from his jacket and began to leaf through the pages.

'There's no record of a tank that size during that period. The only armoured vehicle in Prague at all before the seventeenth century... Oh, dear.'

Jamie didn't like it when the Doctor said that. 'What's the matter?'

‘My book.’ The Doctor held it up so that the pages hung underneath the spine. A fine grey powder fell out. ‘The pages are crumbling, almost as if .. as if ..’ He stared at the falling ash, his face creased in thought. ‘Doctor?’

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‘The pages that correspond to the time periods we’ve seen have evaporated, almost as if they ceased to exist once the scene changed. Only... there’s no order to the destruction. This is an eighty-third-century history of Prague. It cost me extra for a purely physical version, of course.’ He shook the book, and coughed at the resultant cloud of ash. ‘Prague was one of the six Terran cities accorded permanent display status by the fourteenth Galactic Preservation Council. Prague, Budapest, Paris, London, Toowoomba, and Second Carnac. You know, I think made a mistake with Paris...’

‘Doctor?’ said Jamie. He had to keep him focused. ‘The book?’

‘What? Oh, yes.’ He opened it again and ran a finger across its surface, examining the smudge upon his fingertip with a critical eye. ‘The historical record of each age disappears whenever there’s no reason for it to exist. But there’s something else... Quickly, what time period are we in?’

‘You said, er, 1606, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, yes, but that was minutes ago. What does it look like now?’

Jamie almost laughed. ‘How should I know?!’

The Doctor glanced up. ‘Eight hundred and fifty CE. Prince Borivoj

has started building Prague Castle. See? Still here.’ He pointed towards

a hill in the distance, which Jamie saw now bore the first scars of

construction, then flipped to the appropriate page in his book. ‘Although,

perhaps I spoke too soon…’ The scene around them shifted, the cobbles

under their feet smoothing out, and the buildings that surrounded them

growing in size and complexity.

‘Um, Doctor…’ Jamie couldn’t believe what he was seeing. ‘The

castle’s bigger.’

‘Tenth century. St Vitus’s Rotunda is just going up. There, at the far

end of the castle. Oh, this was a golden age. I remember dancing at the

court with a young —’

‘Doctor!’

‘Oh, yes. Sorry.’ More pages turned, more ash flew. Prague flowed

and shifted in a kaleidoscope of colour and noise. Jamie closed his eyes

— he was starting to feel sick.

‘Late eighteenth century. See the rebuilding work going on?’ The

Doctor tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Wait… there.’ He snapped the book

shut, coughed, and waved his hand in front of his grey-clouded face.

‘Remind me not to do that again.’ He pushed the book back inside his jacket and frowned. ‘It’s as if the history of Prague is being wiped out of the time stream all together. But who could do that? The Daleks? No. Or the Ice Warriors? Besides, it’s something else, something not quite planned.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Rhythm! That’s what’s missing.’

‘Rhythm? What are you talking about?’

‘Don’t you see, Jamie? If it were deliberate, there would be some order, some logical sequence. A logical mind, set on a plan, creates

order from chaos, creates a *rhythm*. But this, no, this is random, desperate.’ He blinked. ‘Now why would I say that?’

‘But, Doctor…’ Jamie grabbed his arm and gave him a gentle shake. ‘You said disappearing from history? Shouldn’t we be trying to stop that?’

‘Oh, of course, of course.’ The Doctor looked around him with a distracted air. ‘But it’s not that bad, Jamie. History begins its journey as pure time, sort of like a blank template waiting to be drawn upon. It’s only when it connects with an event, becomes drawn upon by the hand of man, or Time Lord, or whomever, that it stops moving through the universe and becomes a concrete thing. Of course, once an event has occurred, it’s finished, done, useless. The time upon which it is imprinted becomes cold…’

Jamie scoffed. ‘You talk about time as if it’s alive.’

‘Do I? Yes, I suppose I do.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘You know, I’ve always thought of it that way, the way it bucks and moves under us as if... alive!’

He looked at Jamie in sudden shock. ‘A Doredsor!’

‘A what?’

"Doredsor, Jamie. A living creature that eats time. That could do it.’

He turned in circles, staring at the crowded cityscape. ‘But they live at the centre of galaxies, around white holes. They feed on the pure *essence* of time, not cold stuff like this. They’re like any other predator, eat what comes by you. Size and speed, that’s all it would be interested in, not what’s imprinted upon the time itself. That would explain the lack of order. Well, there is an order, but we haven’t been looking at it properly. We’ve been thinking in terms of events, you see, not... but how would one get here? Where would it be? Jamie, how could it even be here?’

‘Doctor, slow down. You’re not making any sense.’

The Doctor stopped spinning, clasped Jamie’s wrists with his hands. ‘A huge thing, Jamie, a sheet of blinding iridescence, a being of pure electricity, swollen with the very building blocks of time, gorging on it.

They eat particles of quantum time, and excrete concepts into the universe in physical form. It’s magnificent, Jamie. A creature of uncontaminated science, a living, existing extension of the universe’s

will.' He bounced on his feet like a child. 'I've seen them, Jamie. I was there when they created mauve...'

'But, Doctor, don't we need to —'

'But where would it be? Everything's changing so rapidly. How would it stay grounded? It's easy with a white hole, they remain in that state for millions of years, but this planet, this city, it's evolving at such speed, how could it maintain its position...?'

'Aye, well, I was just going to say that.' Jamie's sarcasm stopped the Doctor dead. He regarded his young friend with questioning eyes.

'Well, where, Jamie? We have to find it.'

'I don't know... The city's changing too quickly, Doctor. I can't get a

handle on anything. I...'

Their surroundings shifted again. This time, there were no streets. They stood in an open valley, nothing between them and the hills but a rolling plain of tall grasses and an occasional long-branched tree. The river flowed a few hundred yards away and, further down the dale, a tiny circle of hide tents crouched against its bank.

'The Vltava valley,' the Doctor said softly. 'The beginnings of permanent settlement, I'd wager. We must be fifty or sixty thousand years BCE. Things stayed like this for quite a while, Jamie. Fertile lands, plentiful game. This was a good age to be a human. Apart from all the

illness, infections, lack of oral hygiene, medical technology...'

'Doctor?'

'And the breath, my goodness. It was a big step forward when you discovered the toothbrush, let me tell you.'

'Doctor...'

'Did I ever tell you, I was sharing the prison cell with William Addis when he came up with the idea? Well, history says he came up with it...'

'Doctor!'

'What is it, Jamie?'

'I think,' Jamie said as they both gazed up at the hill in the distance, 'I know where your beastie might be hiding.'

'Oh.' The Doctor laid his hand upon Jamie's shoulder. 'Really, why couldn't it be the river? We have to cross it anyway, and all that climbing...'

'Would you rather climb or swim?'

The Doctor removed a handkerchief from his pocket and patted his forehead. 'Why is it every time we help someone it involves a lot of running around?'

'Come on,' Jamie said, starting to stride away. 'Let's get this over and done with.'

'All right. I don't suppose there's any persuading you.' The Doctor blew his cheeks out and followed.

It took them three hours to cross the river, the last fifty yards by

swimming, the bridge having disappeared under them during a hundred

thousand year time shift. The hill— Hradcany Hill, according to the

Doctor — was almost four-hundred-metres high, and it seemed to Jamie

as if they scoured every inch of its surface before they found the

Doredsor. The task was complicated by the nine-hundred-year

construction of the castle: countless times they found themselves

searching previously covered ground as new rooms and laneways

necessitated renewed focus.

By the time they found the Doredsor, they stood in a future where the

only signs of the city were a few lumps and bumps on the surface of the

ground. The creature lay close to the summit, wedged into a crevice that

bore all the hallmarks of a massive bomb blast. The air reeked of sulphur

and poison, and Jamie stumbled half-blind over the body of the

Doredsor.

‘Jamie, quickly!’ the Doctor cried, stepping forward and grabbing a

boulder that was crushing the near corner of the Doredsor’s torso. ‘Oh,

dear me. Please, Jamie.’

He reached over and rolled the boulder away, pausing to listen to it

crashing down the hillside before grabbing the next rock and sending it to

join the first.

They worked without talking, the Doctor uncovering another injury or abuse. Eons changed three times as they worked, setting them back and forward as the passage of eras revealed more or less debris. Eventually, Jamie decided to roll the Doredsor up like a carpet, shifting the massive bulk out from under each rock as it disappeared over the edge of the rise. Soon he was able to hoist it over his shoulder, and half-carry, half-drag the creature down the mountainside to the edge of the valley below.

Jamie laid it out on a patch of grass and the Doctor examined it in detail, running his hands over the eight-foot-square creature. It vibrated with impulses, colours shifting across its body like a shimmering rainbow.

After several minutes of attention, the Doctor sat back on his haunches.

‘What’s the matter?’ Jamie asked.

‘I don’t know.’ The Doctor ran a hand through his hair, gripping the back of his head in a gesture of frustration. ‘It’s an electrical being. It mimics the appearance of flesh, but I don’t have the first idea how to understand its biology, never mind prepare a diagnosis. I don’t even know what current base it operates on.’

‘But if it’s electrical, can’t we connect it to something electrical too… take a reading or something?’

‘No, no, it’s not that easy. You only have the two simplest types of

electricity on Earth. All we'd do is set up a dissonance. We might kill it on

the spot.'

'Well, what about your sonic screwdriver?'

'It's not capable of that kind of reading. Although...' He rummaged in

his pockets and came up with the screwdriver and his recorder. 'This

might work. This might work.'

He quickly unscrewed the end of the recorder, switched on the

screwdriver, and jammed it handle-first into the pipe. Raising the

contraption to his lips, he blew a quick refrain. No sound emerged, but

the Doredsor rippled in response. The Doctor lifted one eyebrow, and

blew another complex finger pattern into the recorder. Again, an

accompanying wave of colour emerged from the Doredsor.

'A-ha!'

The Doctor bounced on the spot, then closed his eyes and played a

complicated scale. The whine of the screwdriver faded in and out, high

pitches and low tones. Jamie covered his ears, and several dogs barked

in the distance. When the Doctor was finished, he placed the mouthpiece

of the recorder against his ear like an ear trumpet. A brilliant array of

colours flashed across the Doredsor. The Doctor frowned.

'Why isn't it working?'

He blew another refrain, and repeated the ear trumpet motion. Unable to contain himself, Jamie interrupted.

'What's going on, Doctor?'

'Jamie, please!' The Doctor fingered the holes of his instrument. 'I'm having to translate from colour to binary to Solresol to musical notation and back again. Even for me, that's a trick.'

After another minute or so of frenzied playing, he unscrewed the screwdriver and reassembled his recorder. He sat cross-legged on the ground, chin pressed into his chest, and ran his fingers through his hair.

Jamie crouched next to him.

'What is it, Doctor?'

The Doctor blew his cheeks out, and rested his hands on his knees, contemplating the Doredsor with a look of sadness that Jamie had rarely seen before.

'It's dying,' the Doctor said.

'Dying?'

'I'm very much afraid so.'

'Can we not do something?'

'Such as?' He put away the sonic screwdriver and ran his hand over the Doredsor's surface.

'But you're the Doctor! There must be something we can do.'

'These creatures are born at the very instant a galaxy forms, Jamie. I'm an infant by comparison. We don't have enough time for me to

learn

all I'd need to know.' He ran his hand across the Doredsor, like a parent

soothing a crying child. 'There, there. It's all right. It's okay.' After a while,

he stood and took a deep breath. 'Come on, Jamie. Let's leave it in

peace.'

'But we have to do something.'

'What?' The Doctor turned upon him. 'I can't do *anything*. Please,

Jamie. I have to go now. They're unique. I can't watch.' He waved a

hand at the dying creature. 'I want to go.'

'No.' Jamie planted his feet wide as if to block the Doctor's passage.

'We have to do the right thing.'

'The right thing? What on Earth is the right thing in this situation,

hmm? Can you tell me?'

'If this beastie is dying. If it has a soul...' Jamie spared it a long,

pitying glance. 'It deserves a funeral, Doctor.'

He stood over the Doctor, defiant and proud. Jamie didn't stand up to

his friend often — he didn't need to — but he had to make his point. The

Doctor gazed at him with something akin to dismay, then, with a careful

smile, he nodded.

'You're right, of course. Jamie, of *course* you're right.'

'We'll do it?'

He clapped his hands. ‘Right, now. How shall we… ah, yes.’

He raised two fingers to his lips and whistled, short, sharp blasts —

like those a shepherd gives his dog. Within seconds a familiar wheezing

sounded across the city, and the air filled with a flashing blue light.

What’s going on?’

The Doctor turned an apologetic smile upon his young companion.

‘Homing device. Just something I’ve been tinkering with.’ He opened the

door of the TARDIS and hopped inside.

‘You mean… all those times… you’ve had me tramping up and

down…’ The Doctor’s head reappeared. ‘Are you coming?’

Even through the TARDIS’s filters, the light from the sun caused

Jamie’s eyes to water as he gazed at the monitor. In one corner, tiny

against the star’s mass, hung the Doredsor. Charges pulsed weakly

across its expanse, the light shifting up and down the spectrum in long,

slow arcs.

‘How did it get up here?’ he asked, not daring to turn his head

towards the Doctor in case the Doredsor should leave and he miss it.

‘Inertial stasis-inversion field,’ the Doctor replied, pushing buttons

upon the console. ‘Think of it as a stretcher for carrying a patient, except

it uses electrical fields, and some theories… well, it’s like a stretcher.’

Jamie risked turning from the screen long enough to give the Doctor a

pained glance.

‘New knowledge, Jamie,’ the Doctor said with a sad smile. ‘Never easy. Not easily quantified, especially not when you’re used to defining life in gross physical terms.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Jamie rubbed one hand down his face. ‘Ach, I’m getting sick of saying that.’

‘Here.’ The Doctor reached out and grasped Jamie’s hand, placing it against a small lever on the console just behind him. ‘Hold this. If you let go, we let go of the Doredsor.’

Jamie wrapped his fingers around the knob. ‘I thought you said it fed upon time? How is getting a suntan going to help?’

‘The Doredsors don’t just eat time.’ The Doctor joined him before the monitor. ‘They eat its very building blocks: quantum phenomena that are created in the hearts of stars and help maintain the flow of time through the universe.’

‘I don’t... never mind.’

‘Don’t worry. It’ll be another ten thousand years before your species discovers the concept, never mind the instrumentation.’ He clasped his hands together, almost as if in prayer. Tor the Doredsor, eating crude time is like eating raw meat instead of veal bourguignon. Nourishing, but not that palatable.’

‘Then what are we doing?’

‘Making it comfortable, Jamie.’ The Doctor patted him on the shoulder. ‘Making it comfortable.’

‘Oh.’

The two men stood side by side and watched the monitor in silence.

* * *

The Doredsor and the TARDIS stayed together, the blue box sending gentle electrical pulses to its dying companion, the same message of comfort over and over: *You are not alone. We are with you. Do not be afraid. You are not alone...*

Soon, the displays of colour along the Doredsor’s skin began to slow. They became erratic, flared, then stopped. The edges of its skin folded over themselves. The creature from the dawn of time fell slowly towards the surface of the sun.

The blue box hung on for a moment longer. Then it too faded away, and moved on to other destinations.

Fable Fusion

Gary A. Braunbeck & Lucy A. Snyder

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor,

with Ace

The little girl knelt at the edge of the pit in the great stone floor, her unwashed hair obscuring her face. The dress she wore was old and tattered, but Ace could see that the garment had been cared for with the greatest affection and tenderness. The girl remained quite still, as if waiting for something important, something glorious, something that was, at the very least, well... *fun*.

She did not have to wait long.

From the depths of the pit came the sound of a violin; softly at first, but with a great, determined pulse in the lower register. Its slowness imbued it with tremendous purpose, like a dance-hall comic telling a complex shaggy-dog story as he worked his way towards the corker of a punchline. The sound immediately relaxed the little girl's body as she whispered: 'Oh, Papa, this is going to be a good'un, isn't it?'

The note rose in pitch and intensity, releasing a single, sustained note that hung in the air, unwavering, until finally it pierced through her, creating a feeling of such sweetness, such delight, such unbound giddiness, that her body trembled from the pure, unapologetic hilarity of

the note; it wrapped itself around her like a fine, delicate thread, over and

over, cocooning her in its eloquent and sharp wit, and the girl — as if

being tickled by dozens of fingers — fell on her side giggling and waving

her hands.

‘Oh, Papa, that’s the funniest one yet!’

No sooner had the spell been cast than it was broken by a sound

from outside the castle: the loud, grinding, metallic grunting sound —

vworp-vworp-vworp! — of some machine trying to come to life or die

quickly.

From deep in the pit, the music of the violin stopped. The little girl

snapped up her head, tossing the hair from her face, and gazed in the

direction of the ugly mechanical sound with a blazing, unbound anger

bordering on hatred.

Ace felt as if the little girl were focusing that hatred directly at her, and

jolted out of her nap in a damp sweat.

‘Ace,’ called the Doctor’s voice from elsewhere in the TARDIS. ‘Best

prepare yourself. Upsy-lazy. We’ll be arriving shortly.’

Shaking off the remnants of the odd little dream, Ace threw back the

covers and ran towards the shower, dropping her clothes along the way

as if they were breadcrumbs carefully scattered in a forest to help her

find her way home.

* * *

Ace had just finished drying her hair when she felt the TARDIS change direction and begin to descend. She slipped on a fluffy patchwork robe and stuck her head into the control room. The Doctor was bent over the controls, scowling in thought.

'Professor, I had the weirdest dream while I was — hey, what's this? I thought we were going to Risa for a bit of a holiday. I could use some tropical surroundings after being cooped up in here — nothing personal.'

'Change of plan, I'm afraid — and no offence taken,' the Doctor replied. 'I've received an encrypted transdimensional call for help.'

'Who from?' Ace asked.

The Doctor made a face. 'Well, it's slightly strange. This appears to be generated by the back-up emergency call system I set up for UNIT. But the time and place are wrong — it sounds like Elizabeth Shaw of all people, but it's coming from Prague in May 2050.'

'Who's Elizabeth Shaw?' asked Ace.

The Doctor gave her a quick smile. 'One of the brightest scientific minds of her generation, but I'm afraid I quite supplanted her in the eyes of the Brigadier when I joined UNIT. Gave her a bit of a hard time, I expect.'

Ace smiled. 'You? *Never*.'

The Doctor gave her a sharp look. 'At any rate, she'd be... well, she'd

be quite elderly in 2050. And this was the voice of a young woman.'

'So maybe she travelled in time, or found the Fountain of Youth,' Ace replied. 'Or maybe someone's stolen the emergency communicator.'

'All are indeed possibilities,' he replied. 'But as I cannot resist a damsel in distress, we're going down to investigate. Put on your walking boots, Ace... but leave the Nitro-9 behind, all right?'

'Aw, Professor!'

'The situation down there might be explosive enough without your well- intended chemical contribution. Should the need arise, I'll let you return to supply our defensive requirements.'

'All right.' She felt naked without her explosives.

'Look on the bright side, Ace. Prague is a lovely and fascinating city even in the ugliest of its eras, and always full of surprises. Consider, if you will, a few high points of its illustrious history. The city was saved from the ravages of the Second World War and the Third Reich because of its beauty; it is home to Rabbi Loew's mythic "Golem", Rudolph II's obsession with finding the elixir of youth, the scientific genius in the form of Kepler and Tycho Brahe, and the alchemical obsessions of Magister Kelly.' He slapped together his hands and began rubbing them furiously.

'Oh, the wonders of the place.'

'Never been before, myself,' she replied. 'When I was growing up, the

furthest we went for a holiday was Clacton.'

'Quite so, quite so. Well, let us hope the geopolitical climate is much improved since your time, Ace.'

He slapped the well-worn Panama hat on his head.

'Do I look presentable?'

Ace titled her head to the side and grinned. 'Did anyone ever tell you, Professor, that in that get-up you insist on wearing, you look just like a dance-hall comic?'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, hooked his thumbs through his suspenders, and bounced on the balls of his feet. 'Well, if I do say so myself, I *have* been known to elocute a ripping yarn or two in my day. I'm not without my share of mirth and joviality, despite what you may think, my dear Ace. I can be quite the funny fellow.'

She smiled. 'Yeah, a right old Monty Python, you are, aren't you?'

The Doctor stopped bouncing, looking as if his pride had been wounded slightly. 'We haven't the time for me to display the full depth and breadth of my redoubtable wit, Ace. Get dressed; I expect that we'll have some investigating to do today. The usual mysteries and enigmas and conundrums that none but us can unravel.' He paused for a moment, then added: 'Dear me, I do hope we're not falling into a rut.'

Ace opted for a stretchy pair of black jeans and some well-worn Doc

Martens she'd picked up in a late-9os boutique in Chicago. It took her just a few minutes to dress, brush out her damp hair and secure it in a ponytail.

She felt the TARDIS materialise and set down with a slight thump just as she emerged from her room.

The Doctor stood by the double doors, twirling his umbrella. 'Let's see what there is to see, shall we?'

Ace slipped on her black jacket, slung her battered rucksack over her shoulder, and followed the Doctor out into what seemed to be the best-outfitted laboratory she'd ever seen.

'Wicked,' she whispered.

The building was an old church, and sunlight shone down through the myriad stained-glass windows into a room full of gleaming white lab tables, computers and delicate glass experimental set-ups. A half dozen university-aged researchers in lab coats were staring openmouthed at them.

'Wicked indeed,' said the Doctor, then muttered, darkly, 'I sense that something's very wrong here.'

'What, them?' Ace asked, nodding towards the lab workers. 'They look all right to me.'

'No, not them!' He waved the crooked, question-mark-shaped end of his umbrella at the others and called, 'Hello there! Sorry to drop in like this! Please, don't mind us. Carry on, carry on.'

An auburn-haired woman stood up from behind a computer and

smiled. ‘You must be the Doctor.’

He doffed his hat and took a bow. ‘Indeed I am, in the flesh, as it were. And you are?’

‘I’m Dr Elizabeth Holub. I’m the principal investigator for this lab. You knew my grandmother, Elizabeth Shaw. She once told me that should anything go seriously wrong, something beyond anything I’d seen before, I should contact you. I apologise if my doing so was presumptuous, but… I’ve simply run out of ideas.’

‘What’s happening here?’ the Doctor asked, gesturing at the activity in the massive lab.

‘The main goal here is to develop a new type of cold fusion, much colder and cheaper than the type they worked out at UCLA a few years ago. People can’t afford petrol or even firewood any more — you undoubtedly know of the bloodshed caused by the petrol riots that have been going on for some time now. The new hydrogen cells have been fiddly and are still quite expensive. People need better options for generating electricity for their households.’

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor replied. ‘A most admirable goal. How’s it been going?’

‘Six months ago we achieved stable fusion at 100°C, no hotter than

boiling water. When the process goes beyond those parameters it simply

fails with an exceedingly low chance of explosion. We sent the process

out to some select labs for further experiments and confirmation, and so

far they've all reported that our technique works wonderfully for them.

'The problem,' Elizabeth continued, 'is that over the past month it's

gradually stopped working for us, and it hasn't worked at all the past two

weeks. I thought perhaps the computer controlling the mix and reaction

was malfunctioning, or there was a variable we hadn't accounted for. But

then some very peculiar things started happening in the city.'

'What sort of peculiar things?' Ace asked. Elizabeth looked to the

Doctor, but when he simply smiled, expecting an answer, she continued.

'Old, standard batteries have stopped working properly. For instance,

the lithium motherboard batteries in our computers either failed or started

producing too much current; we had to pull them all to keep our

computers from frying. The lab's power is supplied by our own hydrogen

fuel cell, of course, since the city plant is unreliable at best. But after the

battery incident we added a new power supply monitor, and it had to filter

out some truly strange power fluctuations from our cell. I did some

checking, and it seems that every few days — right around dawn — there's a tremendous power drain all over the city. And it's getting worse.

At least here we have back-up power sources, but I find it quite worrisome, thinking of all those people out there with pacemakers and mechanical hearts whose batteries might randomly fail.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Quite so, quite so. And I'm sure you've considered the biological implications of this electrical instability trend

progressing?' Elizabeth looked pained. 'Honestly, that's a hard thing to even think about.'

'What biological implications?' Ace asked.

'Our bodies run on electricity,' the Doctor replied. 'The nerve signals that let us move, let us breathe, let us think, let our hearts keep beating

— it's all electrical.'

'Oh. Right,' said Ace. 'That's a problem, then, is it?'

'It's gone way beyond electricity,' said Elizabeth. 'Yesterday... well, my assistant can explain it best, I think.' She turned towards a nearby computer station. 'Viktor, please come here and tell these people what happened to you.'

A young dark-haired man of about 23 stood up and nervously approached the trio.

'Please take apologies,' Viktor said. 'My English, not so good. Always

thought mathematics enough to talk science.' The young man cleared his

throat, looking embarrassed. 'I swear to you, I do not drink or stay awake

too long yesterday... but walking home near technical university, I see

dragon flying through sky with queen riding it like horse.'

'A dragon — as in fire-breathing? With a queen riding on its back?'

Ace asked.

Viktor nodded. 'Very beautiful, both of them. Dragon very fierce-

looking, but not breathing fire that I could see. Queen wearing regal-

looking gown and jewelled crown. Should not be on Zikova Street, for

sure.

'Thank you, Viktor,' Elizabeth said.

After Viktor had gone back to his station, Elizabeth pulled the Doctor

and Ace aside. 'Viktor isn't the only one here who's reported seeing

such... *odd* things. In fact, I daresay that every person you see here has

reported a similar sighting — not of the dragon and the queen, but other

strange creatures.'

'Such as?' asked the Doctor.

'Dancing devils, griffins, a bear, eagle and fish strolling through the

streets.'

Ace couldn't help herself; she had to laugh. 'How on earth does a fish

stroll?'

'On its fins,' replied Elizabeth. 'But there are two characteristics that

all the sightings have in common, Doctor. First, it's only the night-

time

sightings that coincide with the power outages — there's almost no

trouble with batteries and generators or the power plant during the

daytime hours.'

'No exceptions there?'

'Yes — on those days when there is rain or heavy cloud cover, the

power outages are rampant. But here's the other thing, Doctor: all of my

assistants have reported that these creatures, these... apparitions,

whatever you want to call them, all of them look as if they were, well...'

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'Out with it, Elizabeth,' said the Doctor. 'Your grandmother was never

one to mince words; I assume that you have inherited her gift for

straightforwardness, as well.'

Elizabeth took a deep breath, released it, and said: 'Everyone says

that the beings — although solidly three-dimensional — look as if they

were drawn by an artist in pen and ink, or perhaps charcoal.'

The Doctor straightened. 'Really? How absolutely fascinating. Tell

me, have any of your assistants reported any physical evidence that may

support their sightings?'

Elizabeth nodded. 'Viktor says that the dragon's wings smashed in a

large section of the Hostel Dejvice's entrance and first few floors. Thank

goodness the hostel is empty, being temporarily closed for business due

to the energy shortage.'

'Indeed,' muttered the Doctor, tapping the handle of his umbrella. 'Are there any more particulars that we need to know? Leave out no detail, regardless of how tiny, insignificant, or rather silly it may seem.'

Elizabeth grinned. 'I knew Grandmother was right about you!' She turned to face the lab and clapped her hands as she announced:

'Everyone — your attention, please. I'm calling an emergency meeting in

the lower lounge, right now. Viktor, since you've already spoken with the

Doctor, you may remain here to monitor the machines. Everyone else, please go downstairs.'

The Doctor leaned over towards Ace and whispered, 'I do so admire a woman who knows how to take charge.'

'Oh, right!' protested Ace. 'You're all full of respect for the take-charge type of woman, unless of course it's me ordering you about.'

'This isn't the time to argue pedantics, Ace. Time and tide melt the snowman and all that.'

'Any other time, any other place,' said Ace to the Doctor as she stared up at the slightly overcast sky above the church, 'and I'd swear we'd just spent the better part of an hour in the loony bin.'

'The entirety of the multiverse is a loony bin,' replied the Doctor. 'One only need know how to speak the language.'

Ace laughed. ‘Well, then, I couldn’t ask to be paired up with a better interpreter, could I?’

‘I choose to take that as a compliment. If it was meant otherwise, please don’t tell me. I’m quite sensitive.’

‘Here you are,’ said Elizabeth, joining them on the steps outside the church. ‘I’ve marked all the areas where there have been reported sightings over the past several weeks.’ She offered the rolled-up map to the Doctor, who waved it away.

‘No need for that,’ he said. ‘I’ve been here numerous times and know the city quite well, thank you.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘Absolutely,’ he replied. ‘The map of Prague is right up here —’ he tapped his head — in the old toboggan.’

‘Well, you may know the layout of the city,’ said Ace, taking the map from Elizabeth, ‘but I’m still a first-time tourist. Thank you, Elizabeth. This’ll prove useful, if the Doctor and I are separated.’

‘Your confidence in my powers of navigation is deeply touching,’ said the Doctor.

Elizabeth grinned at the both of them, and then added: ‘The eye-witness accounts suggest that most of the activity has been seen heading to or from an area near the Jewish Quarter. Something tells me that the source of the problem may be centred there.’

The Doctor slapped his hands together. ‘Very well, then — near the Jewish Quarter it shall be. Perhaps we’ll catch a glimpse of good Rabbi Loew’s Golem, eh? Wouldn’t that be exciting?’

Ace shrugged. ‘Says you.’

The Doctor turned towards Elizabeth. ‘One last thing — I listened very carefully to your assistants’ accounts, and I don’t recall hearing any of them mention anything about the phenomena coming from or returning to an area near the Jewish Quarter.’ He stared at her unblinking. ‘What did you see, Elizabeth?’

‘How did you know?’

‘Elementary, my dear Holub. Every person in your lab reported at least two encounters with the phenomena, while you, evidently, have spent the whole of your life secluded in this gargantuan edifice, never seeing so much as a bird building its nest. As oddities go, I’d call that one of the more intriguing ones — wouldn’t you agree, Ace?’

‘Does seem a bit off, now that you mention it.’

The Doctor tapped the tip of his umbrella against the stone stairs. ‘Right! So, I ask once again — what did you see, Elizabeth?’

Elizabeth looked down at her feet, sighed, then faced the Doctor. ‘Understand, Doctor, that my position here requires that my staff has the utmost, unshakable confidence in my leadership abilities, and —’

— and you don’t wish to sound daft, lest you lose that confidence.

Yes, yes, I understand your reasons for keeping your personal encounters to yourself, but you needn't worry about Ace and I thinking you incontinent.'

'"Incompetent"', Ace corrected.

'Right you are. So, Elizabeth?'

'I was in the Little Quarter, visiting the new branch of the National Library, and decided to pay a visit to Prague Castle — it's just over the Charles Bridge, on the other side of the Jewish Quarter.'

Unable to maintain eye contact with the Doctor — whose glare was becoming intensely impatient — Elizabeth addressed Ace. 'I fancy myself something of an architecture buff, and Prague has some of the most beautiful buildings in the world — none more so than Prague

Castle.'

'Travelogues bore me to tears, Elizabeth,' said the Doctor.

'And she ain't talking to *you*, now, is she?' snapped Ace.

The Doctor pouted. 'No reason to be cross about it. I have feelings too, you know.'

'The thing is,' Elizabeth continued, 'a section of the castle was destroyed in the petrol riots — a bomb brought down an entire tower. But that tower, just the other night... it was back.'

'You mean it, like, reappeared while you were watching?'

'No,' replied Elizabeth. 'I mean it was still there, as if it had never

been destroyed. Not a stone out of place. And I heard... I heard music from somewhere inside, a —'

'A violin?' asked Ace.

'Yes! How did you know?'

The Doctor turned towards his companion. 'Indeed, I should like to know the answer to that myself.'

'Not important,' said Ace, sliding the map into a side pocket of her rucksack. 'We need to get moving. If the electricity goes out at nightfall,

we've got about six hours.'

'I assume, Elizabeth,' said the Doctor, 'that you will be willing to lend us your car.'

'But you need to know what I saw!' said Elizabeth.

'Yes...?' said the Doctor.

'A giant. A great, fierce-looking thing.'

'A giant?' said Ace. 'As in "fee-fi-fo-fum"?'

Elizabeth nodded. 'Precisely.'

'Oh, this just gets better and better, don't it, Professor?'

'And on my way back across the bridge,' continued Elizabeth, 'I saw a knight conversing with a large earthworm.'

Ace caught the glint in the Doctor's eyes, that sparkle of almost realisation that told her in no uncertain terms he was already piecing things together. Despite his sometimes exasperating her, it was at moments like this, when she could almost hear his mind going clickety-

clickety-click, that she found him unquestionably compelling — in his own peculiar way.

Elizabeth escorted them to her subcompact hydrogen car and gave the keys to Ace. ‘I’m assuming that the good Doctor’s driving skills have not improved with age,’ she said.

The Doctor sighed. ‘Everyone’s insulting me today.’

Ace pointed towards the car. ‘Get in, Professor.’

‘I live to serve.’

And with that, Elizabeth wished them luck, and Ace and the Doctor climbed inside.

Ace was just starting the car when the Doctor reached over and took firm hold of her arm.

‘Out with it, Ace.’

‘With what?’

‘How did you know about the violin music?’

‘Does it matter?’

The Doctor glared at her. ‘Listen carefully to me, Ace. The tower Elizabeth spoke of is called Dalibor Tower. It was built as part of the fortifications to Prague Castle by King Vladislav Jagiello.

‘The tower also served as a prison. It was given its name after its first inmate, Dalibor of Kozojedy, a knight sentenced to death for supporting a peasant rebellion. He was placed in a pit, an underground dungeon.

He

played the violin to pass the time and prevent himself from going mad

from the isolation. People came to listen to him play. I know this because

the story was used by Bedrich Smetana in his opera *Dalibor* — the debut

of which I was fortunate enough to attend in this very city. So I must ask

you a very important question, Ace — how did you know?'

'I heard it in a dream.'

'The dream you mentioned in the TARDIS?'

'Yes.'

'And I take it, then, that you also saw the dungeon pit?'

'Yes. There was a little girl kneeling over it. She was talking to her

father — her father was the one down in the pit, the one playing the

violin.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Impossible. Dalibor of Kozojedy never

had any children.'

'Maybe it weren't Dalibor she was talking to.'

'Then who would she have been...' The Doctor waved his hand.

'Never mind, the identity of the violinist isn't our immediate problem. That

little girl and Dalibor Tower is. I assume, dear Ace, that you would

recognise this little girl should we cross paths with her?'

She nodded. 'I'd know that face anywhere. She was laughing in my

dream, but there was... there was a sadness about her, a sort of

loneliness. I knew just how she was feeling.'

The Doctor gave her hand a tender, affectionate squeeze. 'You're not

alone any more, Ace. Never will be, if I've anything to say about it. Now, I

suggest you start the vehicle and drive in the direction of Charles Bridge.'

Ace reached for the map, and then realised that she *had* said a few

things today that might have hurt the Doctor's feelings, and the Doctor

did need to know that her trust in him was unshaken. 'Which way?'

The Doctor smiled at her, and then pointed. 'That-a-way, pardner —

as John Wayne used to say.'

They had been travelling for less than an hour when they spotted the

first dragon, this one didn't have a queen but it was still imposing. It was

stretched out by the roadside, soaking up the sunlight. The creature —

though fully three-dimensional — appeared to have been drawn, in the

greatest detail, with charcoal: its uniform greyness stood in stark contrast

to the lush field of green on which it lay.

'Pull over,' said the Doctor.

'Stop beside a dragon? Are you daft?'

'Always. Now pull over. I have a hunch.'

'And you wonder why I worry.' Ace pulled over, and the Doctor

immediately climbed out but did not approach the dragon. Since the Doctor's attention was elsewhere, Ace took the opportunity to reach behind her and dig a canister of Nitro-9 — one of six she'd secretly brought along — from her rucksack. She placed it down by her right side where the Doctor couldn't see and curled her finger around the activation pin.

'Hello?' called the Doctor. 'Hello, my good fellow!'

The dragon opened one sleepy eye, stretched, wiggled, then said:

'Are you Hynek? Come in search of the three doves?'

'Hynek?' replied the Doctor. 'I'm afraid not. I'm known as the Doctor. I hate to bother you, seeing as how you're obviously having a grand old time sunbathing, but I was wondering if you might know the quickest route to Prague Castle. My companion and I are in a bit of hurry, so any...'

The Doctor's words trailed off, and after a moment Ace leaned over towards his side of the vehicle. 'Professor? You all right?'

The Doctor leaned down. 'Did he say "Hynek"?'

'That's how it sounded to me.'

'Ah.' He stood up again and continued his conversation with the dragon. 'If you'd be so kind as to point us in the right direction...'

The dragon raised up its left wing and flicked it southward.

The Doctor tipped his hat. 'I thank you for your kindness, Sir Dragon.'

'You haven't by chance a sheep you could spare, have you?' asked

the dragon. ‘I could fancy a snack right about now.’

‘So sorry, fresh out of sheep, I’m afraid. I might be able to locate a chocolate bar, though.’

‘No, thank you,’ said the dragon. ‘Chocolate doesn’t very much agree with me. Ah, well…’ And the dragon closed its eyes, stretched out in the sunlight, and fell back asleep, though not before mumbling something about three doves and dancing devils.

The Doctor leapt back into the car, slamming closed the door and hissing, ‘We must hurry, Ace. We need a library or bookshop. The first one we pass, stop. The very first one.’

Ace pulled away with a bit more speed than was called for; if the Doctor noticed, he said nothing.

‘What’s going on, Professor? Why do we need to go shopping for a *book*?’

‘Not just any book, oh, no — it’s a very specific book I have in mind. And it must be the correct edition!’

‘Got a sudden urge to read, have you?’

‘A sudden *need*, Ace. If my hunch is correct, then we may very well be dealing with something infinitely more threatening than the loss of the city’s power and the presence of these fantastical beings.’

‘And what would that be?’

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak, closed it, tapped the handle

of his umbrella, and then said, ‘Not just yet. I have to make certain that

my hunch is correct.’

‘That’s not fair! I’m entitled to know what we’re up against!’

The Doctor stared at her. ‘Tell me, Ace, when you were alone as a

child, did you ever find solace in fairy stories?’

Ace pulled in a deep breath; the Doctor’s question had opened doors

in her memory that she’d prefer remained closed forever. ‘I don’t want to

talk about it.’

The Doctor once again squeezed her hand. ‘You’ve given me my

answer. We need never speak of this again. Unless of course you feel

compelled to share with me.’

By the time Ace had managed to navigate the side streets leading to

the Little Quarter, the sky was growing dim as more clouds crowded the

horizon. Though enough sunlight managed to break through to give her a

clear field of vision, the shadows were massing for a final attack.

‘Not much daylight left, it looks like,’ she commented.

‘Oh, going by the clock, there’s still well over three hours of daylight

remaining,’ said the Doctor as he leaned forward and looked up through

the windscreen. ‘However, I’d say that the elements are conspiring

against us. If you’ll look around, Ace, you’ll see that there are fewer cars

on the road and more horse-drawn wagons. It would appear the

citizens

of Prague are as resourceful as ever. They know the electricity is going

to fail them as soon as the lights fades, and they've found a way to adapt

— at least, as far as their transportation needs go.'

'Tell that to the bloke with the tricky pacemaker in his chest. I'm sure

he'll find a lot of comfort in that.'

'Point taken. The branch of the National Library should be just round

this bend.'

As indeed it was: a towering, elegant, stone building. To Ace, the

place looked more like a cathedral than a place to house books — but, of

course, as the Doctor would undoubtedly point out to her, all libraries

were a sort of cathedral, when you thought about it.

'Impressive,' said the Doctor. 'Or, if I may borrow your term, wicked.'

'No arguments here,' replied Ace. She was just pulling into a parking

space when the car completely stopped; the engine died, the dashboard

lights cut out, and the radio — which Ace had been playing at a low

volume — snapped off.

'Well, well,' said the Doctor. 'It appears that the clouds have at last

ruled the day — or what remains of it.'

Ace looked out of her window. All around the Quarter, lights were

going out; no sooner did the electricity in one building cease to function

than someone inside began lighting numerous candles. Even the interior

of the library began to sparkle with dozens of small dancing flames.

‘Now what?’ she asked.

Opening his door, the Doctor replied, ‘We go in search of the needed

book. Come, Ace.’

They scurried up the stone stairs leading to the magnificent wooden

doors of the entrance, but no sooner had they reached it than the Doctor

was knocked backwards by some invisible force, losing his balance and

dropping firmly on his backside, his Panama hat falling from his head.

But his was not the only hat Ace saw — as soon as the Doctor

collided with whatever invisible barrier had stopped him, a well-worn cap

fell as well, seemingly from thin air.

At the same instant the cap became visible, a young-ish lad dressed

in woollen peasant rags and carrying an ancient rucksack appeared; no

more than 17, looking several centuries out of date in dress and manner,

he too had been knocked on his backside.

‘Hello,’ said Ace, looking back and forth between the two. ‘What’s

this?’

‘ *This*,’ said the Doctor, getting back on his feet and snatching up not

only his hat but the stranger’s cap, ‘is one Sleepy John, unless I am

mistaken.’

Sleepy John looked wide-eyed at the Doctor as he rose to his feet.

‘I’m afraid you have me at a great disadvantage, sir. You know my name,

but I don’t recall our ever having met before.’

‘I’m known as the Doctor, and we have met before, my good fellow — many times, in fact. I know your tale well. Have you located the secret place where the Queen is off to every night? I imagine the King is exasperated with concern.’

‘Hold on,’ said Ace. ‘I don’t mean to seem rude, but I think I’m entitled to know —’

The Doctor faced her. ‘We no longer need to go inside the library, Ace.

Bumping into Sleepy John here has now told me all we need to know.’ And with that, he removed his Panama hat, slipped on Sleepy John’s cap, and immediately disappeared.

‘Professor?’ yelled Ace, suddenly feeling panic. ‘Professor, where —’

‘Right where I was,’ came the Doctor’s voice. A moment later, he removed the cap; both he and it were quite visible again. ‘An odd feeling,

invisibility. Really, Sleepy John, I don’t know how you put up with it. That… queasy feeling in one’s stomach.’

‘After a while, you no longer notice or mind,’ replied John. ‘No discomfort is too much to endure for the sake of my mistress’s content.’

The Doctor shot a quick glance at Ace. ‘Your mistress, you say?’

‘I do.’

Ace, now frustrated and more than a bit anxious, yanked the Doctor’s hat from his head and took John’s cap as well. ‘All right, then! Neither one of you are going to get your stupid hats back until one of you tells me, right now, what’s going on!’

The Doctor pointed at Ace but addressed John. ‘She’s got a lot of spirit.’

‘’Tis an odd name for a lady so delicate and lovely,’ said John.

‘Odd?!’ shouted Ace. ‘What’s so odd about — hello. Did you just call me “delicate and lovely"?’

‘Aye,’ replied John, bowing gracefully, taking hold of her hand, and kissing it.

Ace slowly pulled back her hand, red-faced, and desperately trying not to giggle.

‘The fellow you are looking at, my delicate and lovely Ace,’ said the Doctor, ‘is none other than Sleepy John, a character from a book published in 1917 by Unwin Brothers Limited, the Gresham Press, Woking and London. The book in question is called *Czech Folk Tales*, the stories in its table of contents having been selected and translated by

Dr Josef Baudis, M.R.I.A., Lecturer in Comparative Philology at Prague University.

‘If the appearance of the dragon we saw back on the road — as well as those beings described by Elizabeth’s assistants — struck you as

odd, it's because they are three-dimensional recreations of the illustrations contained in that very book, drawn by... let me see now —

ah, yes, I have it! The first two illustrations are copies of pictures by Joseph Manes; the others were drawn by E. Stansk, who in some case has adopted drawings by Mikulás Ales.'

'I don't believe it,' said Ace, gawking at Sleepy John.

'Believe it,' replied the Doctor.

'May I ask, Doctor,' said John, 'if you too seek not only the Queen but the princess and the three roses?'

'What did you say? The princess?'

John gave a nod of his head. 'And the three roses.'

The Doctor folded his arms across his chest, then raised one hand to scratch at his forehead. 'This is very strange. Very strange, indeed.'

Ace looked at him. 'Stranger than bumping into monsters and characters from an old storybook?'

'I should say so, yes. Give me a moment to think.' He turned away from them, facing the street.

'M'lady,' whispered John to Ace. 'I don't wish to appear discourteous, but will you give back my cap so I can be on my way?' He turned slightly

so that Ace could see the contents of his rucksack: vegetables, fruits, fresh meats and poultry, a small cask of water, and several boxes of

matches. 'My mistress has not eaten in three days, and I must get this

food to her.'

'Did you steal this food from the marketplace? While wearing this?'

She held up his cap.

'Aye, that I did.'

Ace thought that — if one were forced into a situation where food must be stolen in order to survive — it was well smart to enlist someone who could make himself invisible.

'I think,' she said to John, 'that we need to talk to your mistress.'

'My mistress talks to no one but we who live to serve her. She has no desire to be part of the affairs of man or his implements of power.'

'"Implements of power"? What do you mean by that?'

John pointed to a darkened street light, the unmoving cars in the street, even the phone lines on their towers. 'My mistress lost her father to the great battle over such power many years ago. He was... he was killed in a most brutal fashion.'

'The petrol riots,' said Ace, more to herself than to John. Was her... was your mistress's father... was he killed when Dalibor Tower was destroyed?'

'Aye, and a great conflagration it was. He had hidden her elsewhere in the castle where she would be safe from harm, but he himself fell victim to the brutality of the mobs.' John looked at his feet. 'He was crushed when the tower came down. He lived for nearly two days afterward, trapped beneath the rubble. My mistress knelt beside the ruins

talking to him, trying to keep him alive. But it was all for naught. His death broke her young heart. She took the only possession she had remaining — the book of which the Doctor spoke, a gift from her father — and retreated into the castle, never to venture out into the evil world of men and their power again.'

'The batteries, the electricity, the generators, all of it,' said Ace to herself. 'She's drawing on that power to bring you to life! That's why the sightings continue after the sun goes down!'

'And why the entire city experiences massive power surges at dawn every few days,' said the Doctor, rejoining the two of them. 'The girl must sleep sometime, and no doubt her waking causes a moment or two of tremendous confusion and disorientation, thus the surges. Excellent deduction, Ace. During the day, this girl draws her power from the sun — it's child's play to convert solar energy into electricity — but at night... ah, at night she has no choice but to draw her power from every available source of man-made energy. And seeing how she hates it so — after all, the fight for energy cost her father's life — she would have no regrets whatsoever about doing so. Electricity, batteries, generators, all of it, is evil in her eyes. It's what killed her father.'

John once again nodded his head. 'Aye, good Doctor. She has

spoken of her hatred for it often.'

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'As she understandably would. But what puzzles me — well, there are several things that puzzle me at the moment, so why don't we address them in order? One: the last petrol riot in Prague was over Is years ago.

May I ask, Sleepy John, how old is your mistress?'

'One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five days.'

The Doctor's eyes grew wide. 'Five years old? Ace, this is worse than I feared.'

'How do you mean?'

'Remember when I told you that we may very well be up against something infinitely more dangerous than a simple series of power outages and these sightings of strange creatures?'

'Yes.'

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'Well, we're facing what is perhaps the most dangerous opponent we've yet encountered — the iron will of a child's imagination, a child who also has the power to make her fantasies act against a world she hates. If she's been secluded for this long, then of course she'd have no idea of the medical technologies people rely upon — pacemakers and such — and so would have no idea the harm she's causing, the danger she's inflicting on the people of this city.'

Ace stared at him. 'I'm not sure she'd care if she did know, Professor.

If the petrol riot that killed her father was 15 years ago, then she ought—'

'— there is no room in her universe for what *ought* to be, Ace. She retreated into Prague Castle and, in essence, froze time for her and those who, like Sleepy John, exist only in her imagination.'

Ace felt her throat tighten and her eyes begin to tear. 'Oh, that poor little thing. How... how lonely she must be!'

'Quite so,' said the Doctor. 'Where was I?'

'You were about to ask your second question,' said John.

'Ah, yes, thank you. Two: you say that you are also in search of a princess and three roses, correct?'

'Aye.'

'Fascinating. Three: why were you here at the library?'

'My mistress sent me to retrieve the very book of which you spoke — and to fetch the two of you, should I have the opportunity to find you.'

'Why did she want the book?'

'I think it not a matter of her wanting it, good Doctor. I think it a matter of her wanting you *not* to have it. I must confess that it puzzled me, as she already has a copy.'

'Yes, a last gift from her father, I heard. So your mistress has been aware of our presence in this city since we arrived, I take it?'

'Aye.'

The Doctor looked at Ace. 'What tremendous, incredible, startling power she must possess.' He turned to Sleepy John: 'My good sir,

would

you be so kind as to escort us to your mistress?'

'I have a wagon with horses waiting across the road.'

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Both Ace and the Doctor looked to where John was pointing. 'I don't see anything,' said Ace.

'That's because the same enchantment that enables Sleepy John to become invisible has been extended to anything his mistress deems necessary — isn't that right, John?'

'Aye.'

'Well, I daresay, Ace, that you and I are about to attract some curious stares, as we'll be floating along in the air.'

'No, good Doctor,' said John, producing two more caps from his sack. 'I've been instructed to ask you to wear these so that none will see us and be tempted to follow.'

Taking his cap from Ace — but not yet placing it on his head — John began to descend the stairs, gesturing for Ace and the Doctor to follow.

He took hold of Ace's arm. 'Should the need arise — and I hope it doesn't — do we have those canisters of Nitro-9 that you think I don't know you smuggled out of the TARDIS?'

'No one's ever known me as well as you, Professor.' Ace reached down and took hold of his hand. 'Or accepted me as you have.'

'Yes, well... I don't know who else but you would put up with the likes

of me.' He smiled at her. 'So we're well-paired, don't you think?'

'I do.' Ace looked to Sleepy John, leading them across the street.

'What else is puzzling you, Professor? Don't try to deny it — you've got

that "I still don't know all the answers" look about you.'

'The dragon by the road earlier. He asked about three doves and

spoke of dancing devils, did he not?'

'Yes.'

'And Sleepy John, he says his quest is not only to discover where the

Queen goes at night, but to find the princess and the three roses.'

Ace shrugged. 'Seems simple enough to me.'

The Doctor stopped and turned to face her, taking hold of her

shoulders. 'But it's *not* simple, Ace, not simple at all! We have

encountered two characters from the book, yet they have told us that

they are involved in some way with elements from... let me see... at least

six different stories! Sleepy John had nothing to do with the princess or

the three roses — those are two completely separate tales from his. The

dancing devils of which the dragon spoke? *Those* are from Sleepy

John's story.'

'It's all mixed up then, isn't it?'

'Very much so. Which can mean only one of two things: either the

girl's storybook has fallen apart and she has misassembled the pages,

thus confusing the story elements, or...'

‘Or she’s gone out of her mind from the hatred and loneliness.’

‘Not unlike those prisoners kept in the pit of Dalibor Tower. I rather prefer my theory to yours.’

‘Me too.’

‘Well, we’ll know soon enough,’ said the Doctor, looking out into the growing darkness.

‘Would you be cross with me if I told you I was scared?’ asked Ace.

‘Not if you won’t be cross with me for sharing your sentiment.’

They joined Sleepy John in the invisible wagon — after much fumbling about — then donned their caps and vanished from sight.

All the storybook’s characters were lining the road as they climbed from the wagon and followed Sleepy John into the tower: princesses, griffins, dancing devils, numerous dragons, hairy beasties, even the bear, eagle, and strolling fish were there. Ace was overwhelmed at the amount of people and creatures, and as she studied them she saw the great detail that had gone into their drawing, and was once again amazed that any human being could possess the gift to create something so lifelike, so utterly real. She thought of how, as a child, she had wished she had a talent, something to make her popular with the other children, but she’d been an outcast, with only her fists and her quick temper to protect her from the others’ cruelty.

Even though she’d not yet seen this little girl, she felt that she knew

Sleepy John's mistress as well as she knew herself— angry, confused, sad, and so very, very alone.

The thought nearly tore her in half, and made her feel even more grateful for the time storm that had whisked her away and dropped her in the Doctor's path. She'd not known a truly lonely moment since meeting him... nor a dull one, for that matter.

They followed John into the tower and up a seemingly unending winding staircase until they at last reached a wide, deep, dark chamber that was so chilly Ace could see her breath. In the distance there was a small fire, the flames contained by a circle of stones to hold the coals in place. Beside the fire was the little girl from her dream, staring down languorously into a pit in the floor.

Ace felt the Doctor's hand on her arm.

'We must proceed with the greatest caution, Ace.'

'I know.' She could not move her stare from the little girl's face: so pale, so drawn, with circles under the eyes far too dark for a child so young. Despite her instincts, Ace wanted nothing so much at that moment than to run over and hold the little girl in her arms and whisper,

'It's all right, love, it's all right. I'll be your friend. I'll make it all better.'

'Please wait here,' said Sleepy John, 'whilst I speak with my mistress.'

'Of course,' said the Doctor.

With a bow, John was off.

‘She’s so small,’ said Ace. ‘She looks more like a girl of three than five.’

‘I imagine that living in these conditions for so long has not been of the greatest benefit to her physiology.’

Ace glared at him. ‘Must you talk about it in such clinical terms?’

‘If I am to keep my nerves intact then, yes, I must.’

‘What’s the matter with your nerves?’

The Doctor slowly raised the tip of his umbrella and pointed towards a distant corner where a massive shadow dislodged itself from the darkness and moved towards the firelight.

The giant ogre’s face was a twisted mass of scars and infantile rage. Its mighty arms bulged with muscle and sinew, and in each of its enormous hands it held a large block of stone.

Its stare was intensely focused on the Doctor and Ace.

‘Her bodyguard, I would imagine,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘And from the looks of him, we could not possibly outrun those stones should he decide to chuck them in our direction. I suggest we remain quite still for the moment.’

The ogre snarled quietly, and as if to confirm the Doctor’s suspicions, lifted the stones and nodded towards the two of them.

‘I’ll bet he’s got wicked aim,’ whispered Ace.

‘That goes without saying.’

Ace slowly slipped her hand into a pocket of her rucksack and grasped a Nitro-9 canister.

‘No,’ said the Doctor, grasping her arm tighter. ‘Despite the considerable size of this room, it is still an enclosed space. We might harm the girl — not to mention bring the tower down around us.’

Ace released her grip on the canister, but left her hand resting against it, nonetheless; it made her feel safe.

Sleepy John finished speaking with the little girl, then rose and turned towards the Doctor and Ace. ‘My mistress requests the pleasure of your company.’

Slowly, the Doctor and Ace walked towards her. As they did so, the ogre moved closer until it towered behind them, holding the great stones over their heads.

‘This is most distressing,’ whispered the Doctor.

‘Hush,’ said Ace.

‘Hello,’ said the little girl. ‘My name is Nápev.’

‘Melody,’ said the Doctor. ‘Your name is Czech for melody.’

‘Melody,’ said Ace. ‘What a lovely name — what a beautiful name.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nápev. ‘Papa chose it. He said I was like a song.’

Ace smiled. ‘That’s nice.’

‘Mama died when I was born. Papa and me, we lived here until the bad people came.’

‘I know,’ said Ace. ‘We — the Doctor and I — we know all about how terrible things have been for you, and we came to help.’

Nápev studied her face for a moment, and then said, ‘You’re not going to try and take Papa and all my friends away, are you?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Ace,’ said the Doctor. ‘Be careful what you promise her.’

‘I don’t think I like him,’ said Nápev. ‘He reminds me of the people who took Papa away.’

Ace looked at the Doctor and dismissed him with a wave of her hand. ‘Oh, don’t be bothered by him — he has a strange way about him, and he can be a royal pain, but he’s very smart, and very kind.’

‘Really?’

‘Cross my heart.’

Nápev looked at the Doctor. ‘Should I smash him?’ she asked. ‘You could stay here with me. We could be friends. Papa would play such wonderful music for us.’

‘No!’ shouted Ace. ‘No, please, don’t... don’t hurt him. You see, he’s my best friend, my only friend, really — unless you want to be my friend.’

Nápev reached out with a trembling hand and touched Ace’s cheek. You’re not like the others,’ she said. ‘Sleepy John and the rest.’ She knelt down and rummaged through a pile of rubbish, at last finding what she was looking for — a book; a very tattered, damaged book, with a

broken spine and loose pages stuffed back inside in the wrong order.

‘Papa read to me from this, such wonderful stories — and he could read

them so well.’

‘Oh, I’ve no doubt about that,’ said Ace, taking the book from Nápev and showing it to the Doctor. ‘I’m sorry that it’s fallen apart like this.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Nápev, taking the book from Ace and holding it against her chest like most little girls would hold a favourite doll. ‘I remember how he read them, and I remember the stories. Did your papa

ever read stories to you?’

Ace shook her head. ‘No, not really.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Nápev.

Ace reached out and took the little girl’s hand. ‘It’s a terrible thing, isn’t it? To be alone, to have no one to play with or talk to except for people and things you make up or read about.’

‘Did they laugh at you?’ asked Nápev. ‘Did they shout cruel words at you and throw things and chase you into dark places?’

Ace felt a tear slip from her eye and slide down her face. ‘Yes, they did. I was alone until I met the Doctor.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Everybody calls me "Ace".’

‘Why are you crying?’ asked Nápev.

‘Because I see how cold and dark it is in here, and I remember what it was like when I’ve felt alone. To grow up not getting on with your

parents... to never dance with a boy, never have someone who loves you

there to tuck you in at night, someone you know will still be there for you

in the morning... I used to live in this place, Iceworld, where I felt so

alone... it hardens your heart too soon, and the world will do that soon

enough.' She reached out and gently pulled Nápev towards her. 'You've

not had a childhood, and that's cruel, and you so deserve to be happy,

Melody. Please let the Doctor and me help you.'

Nápev lay her head against Ace's shoulder. 'How can you help me?'

'I know a place,' said the Doctor. 'I know a place where you will have

many people, many friends who will care for you, who will teach you how

to use your abilities without — well, without harming others.'

Nápev's head snapped up. 'I've never hurt anyone! They hurt Papa!

They killed him!'

'I am aware of that,' said the Doctor. 'But you must understand,

Nápev, that those people who did this terrible thing to you and your

father, they're long since dead or in prison and cannot harm you any

longer. But when you summon forth your friends like Sleepy John and

the dragons and this rather unnerving fellow who's holding these stones

over my head, you... how to put this?'

'It hurts people,' Ace said. 'I know you don't mean for it to, but it

does.'

'But all I do is drink in the magic. It's all around. I feel it in the air, in my head, on my skin, all the time.'

Ace looked at the Doctor with pleading in her glistening eyes. 'That magic, Nápev,' he said, 'is what helps the people of this city to live. It's what helps them care for their children, their pets, their friends. When you drink the magic so as to bring forth your friends, the people who live outside the walls of this castle, they cannot take care of their children. They cannot tuck them into warm beds because it's so cold. They cannot make food for their breakfast.' He leaned forward. 'They cannot read stories to them as your father did to you because they have no light by which to see their books.'

Nápev's eyes began tearing. 'I didn't know.'

'Well, now you do. Will you be a good little girl and stop drinking the magic?'

'But all of my friends will go away. Papa will leave me.'

'Oh, no, dear child, that won't happen at all.' The Doctor knelt beside Nápev and Ace, placing a finger against the child's forehead. 'They will stay with you in here.' Then he touched her chest above her heart. 'And here. And when we take you to this place I know of, you can call them out as often as you wish and it will hurt no one. Your father can play his

violin as much as he wants, and the dragons can fly, and the fish can

stroll, and Sleepy John can still run to market and fetch food for you.

Nothing will change — except, of course, for your surroundings.'

'Is it a nice place?'

'Yes, it is. Particularly for a child of your talent.'

Ace glared at him. 'You're talking about Gallifrey, aren't you?'

'Yes. Nápev will find herself and her friends most welcome there.'

'How do you know they'll —'

'I still have friends, Ace. Some of them on the Council. Gallifrey will be

the best place for our Nápev, I promise.'

'Is it far?' asked Nápev.

'Oh, very,' replied the Doctor. 'Across the expanse of the universe.

Oh, the adventure we'll have while travelling there! Have you ever seen

the stars so close that you could reach out and touch them, Nápev?

Have you ever flown through space on the wings of time? Have you ever

seen a supernova?'

Wide-eyed, Nápev shook her head. 'It sounds so beautiful.'

'Well, imagine how much more thrilling the trip will be with your father

there to play music for all of us, eh?' The Doctor offered his hand. 'If

you'll release the magic back to the people of this city, we've only to walk

back to where our spaceship awaits, and then, zoom, we're off to the stars with the entire cosmos our playground.'

In a blink — a literal blink of Ace's eyes — the ogre and Sleepy John vanished. From a small opening high up on the farthest wall, the glow of street lights flowed inside.

'Thank you, Nápev,' said the Doctor, helping the child to her feet and leading her towards the stairway. 'You'll have a most glorious time on our trip, I promise you.'

Once outside, Nápev stood between Ace and the Doctor. Each of them took hold of one of the little girl's hands as they walked from the tower and towards the bridge.

'Lovely night, isn't it?' asked the Doctor, nodding upward at the glowing street lamps and the sparkling, warm lights from inside the houses they passed.

'Papa and I never had a house like those,' said Nápev. 'You will,' said Ace.

'Promise?'

Ace looked at the Doctor, who gave a quick nod of his head.

'Promise,' said Ace.

Nápev then tugged on the Doctor's hand. 'Do you know any good stories? Please tell us a story while we walk.'

'Oh, the stories I can tell! I wouldn't know where to begin.'

'Lucky us,' said Ace.

‘Be nice,’ said Nápev. ‘And just for that, you get to tell us a story.’

‘Oh, Ace,’ said the Doctor, smiling. ‘Something tells me this is the

beginning of a beautiful friendship.’

And the three of them walked on into the night, the lights from the city

guiding them to safety and warmth and grand adventure.

Men of the Earth

Kevin Killiany

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Tegan Jovanka and Nyssa

Pain shot through Kern Shaw's back and shoulders. He almost dropped the hundred-kilo crate, slamming it onto the high metal table with a clang.

He listened, but no one came running to see what had fallen in Dr Walters's lab. Which was good. He'd taken enough ribbing from the young techs about getting too old to do his job. He had plenty of years left.

Which didn't mean taking a break between lifts wasn't a good idea.

Kern lowered himself heavily onto a crate by the table. The oily rock samples seemed to suck energy out of him. Or maybe it was their smell,

like gas bubbling out of a bog, making him light-headed.

Crossing his arms along the edge of the high table, he leaned forward to rest his forehead. Counting on his ears to warn him of any approach,

he closed his eyes. He wasn't going to sleep, just 'checking for cracks', as his mother used to say. Resting his eyes for a moment.

The bog smell was strong now. Maybe because his face was so close to the box on the table. Stank it did.

Kern realised he was losing his fight with sleep and accepted the fact

that he did not care. Dr Walters wasn't on until next shift and it would be

hours before anyone thought to wonder were Kern Shaw had got to.

Something brushed along his cheek.

Bug?

He tried to brush at the sensation, and discovered his arm wouldn't

move.

Surprised, Kern sat upright, his forehead tugging free of his sleeve

with a sucking sound. His arms were covered with some sort of slime

oozing from the box on the table. He tried to stand, but more slime

covered his legs, holding him fast to the crate under him.

Kern leaned and twisted and arched his back, trying to break the

suction, but the ooze held like glue. He could feel the viscous fluid

flowing up his body as he pulled, throwing his weight from side to side.

The slime reached his face.

Kern shook his head violently, but couldn't fling the stuff away.

He screamed too late. The green-brown mass covering his mouth

bulged out — a translucent, muffling bubble.

Darkness flowed across his eyes.

'Prague, arguably one of the most beautiful cities your planet has

ever produced,' the Doctor said, his eyes darting from the navigation

display to the directional input as he double-checked his figures. 'A city

of opera and architecture; history and art; dark mythology and inspiring

faith. Really quite enchanting.'

Evidently satisfied, he pressed the final stud.

'If you wanted to visit an Earth city, we've been to Amsterdam before,'

Tegan pointed out. 'Or why not London, your favourite?'

'Of course,' said Nyssa, ' *I've* always wanted to see San Francisco.'

'All lovely choices,' the Doctor agreed with one of his inordinately

pleased-with-himself smiles. 'But none had anything that compares to

this!'

Flourishing his hands like a street-corner magician, the Doctor

pressed the scanner control. Tegan and Nyssa turned to look out on...

'A steel-lined corridor?' Nyssa asked.

More like brushed nickel, Tegan thought. The pale grey corridor —

wide as a city street and stacked with crates and boxes — stretched as

far as she could see. Sunlight, streaming down through skylights,

bounced off the walls, filling its length with an opalescent glow.

'Truly lovely, Doctor,' she said. 'I can see why you thought this was

worth the journey.'

'That was supposed to be the skyline of Prague at sunset.' The

Doctor frowned at the sunsetless corridor. 'How could we have ended up

here?'

'We'd be more likely to have an answer if you'd taught us how the

TARDIS works,' Tegan pointed out.

‘Perhaps I shall teach you.’ The Doctor’s tone was distracted as he reread the navigation panel. ‘Later. The geo-location is accurate, the year is — well, not quite what I intended, but nothing that would explain this.’

‘What about altitude?’ Nyssa asked, still studying the limited view. ‘Perhaps this is a space station?’

‘Well done, Nyssa,’ the Doctor said, glancing up from the controls. ‘But wrong direction. We are approximately eight point four kilometres below the streets of Prague.’

‘Underground?’ Tegan asked. ‘But the sunlight…’

‘Artificial,’ the Doctor said, reading the sensor display for confirmation. ‘Though the spectrum is nearly exact, there is very little heat. Despite their impressive luminescence, I suspect you’ll find they’re low-energy neon fixtures. And the metal is not steel but duratherm alloy. Highly magnetic.’

‘Prague was an underground city?’ Nyssa asked.

‘Not in any history text with which I’m familiar,’ the Doctor answered. ‘In fact I have no record of any facility of this type ever existing in central Europe.’

‘A bit of Earth history you don’t know?’ Tegan teased. ‘That’s a bit

unusual, isn’t it?’

‘Unheard of,’ the Doctor answered seriously. ‘This should not exist.’

For a long moment he stood, looking out through the viewer at the metal

corridor.

‘So,’ Tegan asked more soberly. ‘What should we do?’

‘Do?’ the Doctor smiled as he pulled his hat from his pocket. ‘Go have

a look around, of course.’

Casually swatting the door control, he was out of the TARDIS without

looking to see if the women followed.

‘You knew that,’ Nyssa accused as she headed towards the open

portal. ‘Just once...’ Tegan sighed as she followed. ‘Just once, I wish

he’d say, "This looks chancy, let’s be sensible and leave well enough

alone."’

‘Chief?’

Emergency Response Chief Melva Hill, seated in the centre of the

Response Control, nodded in acknowledgement without looking up from

the status summary on her computer tablet.

If the Svarozhich Project hadn’t been secured kilometres

underground, the endless series of equipment failures and power

outages would have indicated sabotage. But there was no way for

saboteurs to reach them — and no member of the project team would

risk being buried alive.

Realising the emergency response technician had said nothing after

calling her, Hill glanced up to see the man’s hunched back as he pored

over his monitor array. He hadn't seen her nod.

She slid her tablet into the arm-bracket of her chair and pushed herself to her feet with a sigh. It would be quicker to go over than ask him to explain.

Phaugh. The sudden wave of swamp stench brought tears to her eyes.

Over the last few weeks the rotting stink had found its way into the ventilation system. A harmless slime mould, they'd been assured, but Hill couldn't help but suspect it was symptomatic of something else going wrong.

That and the cockroaches. She shuddered.

'What have you got, Mallory?'

Resting her hand on the back of the technician's chair, Hill surveyed the bank of monitor screens and gauges at his station.

'There's movement on the south side of level 77 — in tube five,' Mallory answered, pointing to the relevant numbers on his display. 'I think it's people, but there are no transponder signals.'

Hill sighed again and leaned in to read the indicated screen; trying to puzzle out what the inexact figures represented.

Security was low priority in an instillation built eight kilometres below

ground, which meant a complete network of surveillance modules wasn't

in the budget. Emergency Response was reduced to deducing what they

could from the minimal data provided by thinly scattered cameras and

environmental sensors selected for their economy rather than their

accuracy.

Now a handful of those overtaxed sensors reported three objects

moving along tunnel 77/5, heading towards the central shaft at about five

kilometres an hour. The sensors were reasonably sure the objects were

between one and two metres tall and massed fifty to one hundred kilos.

A work crew, Hill decided. Probably making a final check of seams or

some such. She didn't remember a scheduled inspection, but decided it

wasn't worth going back to get her computer tablet to confirm.

Just as this inspection team had evidently decided it wasn't worth

wearing their identity badges.

The duratherm alloy lining the tunnels of Svarozhich made the use of

radio impossible. All communication depended on antenna wires strung

along every tunnel and shaft and transponders imbedded in the ident

badges all personnel were required to wear. Why anyone would risk

getting lost eight kilometres underground without their ident badge was

beyond Hill's comprehension.

'How long until we have a visual?' she asked.

Mallory brought a schematic of the tunnel network up on a screen.

‘We should have them on camera in two minutes.’

Hill nodded, reading the three-dimensional map for herself.

Glowing icons — one gold and two blue — told her there was a scientist and two general technicians two levels directly below the unknown inspection crew. A glance at the roster display told her the gold ident number belonged to Dr Jane Flora, the biologist just hired to solve the riddle of the mysterious stinks and creepies.

Hill shook her head again.

Annoying as the slime and the bugs were, they should have been ignored as trivialities. In a few weeks all of Svarozhich would be completely sterilised — anything not composed of duratherm alloy flash-burned to vapour by red-hot magma.

But the scientists, being scientists, had seen the nuisance of ooze and insects as mysteries.

And mysteries had to be solved. Which meant bringing in a biologist and giving her clearance to wander anywhere the mould or roaches appeared.

And her on 77 means a fresh crop of bugs or slime, Hill thought.

Abloran is going to *love* that.

Setting aside the thought of the project director’s reaction to the new outbreak, Hill toggled the communicator switch.

‘Security Chief Hill to Dr Flora,’ she said crisply.

‘Jane here,’ Flora answered. ‘What’s up, Melva?’

Hill blinked at the informality, but pressed ahead.

‘Sensors show a work team on level 77, almost directly above you, none of whom is wearing an ident badge,’ she said. ‘Could you dispatch one of your team to remind them of basic security protocols?’

‘I’ll go myself as soon as I complete my notes,’ Flora answered. ‘If there’s any scolding to be done it should come from as far up the food chain as possible.’

‘As you think best,’ Hill answered and broke the connection.

‘Chief?’ Mallory said. ‘If there’s a team in the tunnels without their badges, wouldn’t there be three unmoving badges in dormitory? I just checked the roster —’

Reaching past the technician, Hill slapped the security channel open.

— and every badge is accounted for,’ Mallory finished.

‘Hill to Yannis,’ Hill snapped into the microphone. ‘Sergeant, take a security team to level 77, the juncture of tunnels 14 and five. We have intruders.’

Jane Flora tried not to wrinkle her nose. Professional biologists did not cringe while peering at fetid puddles of mysterious semi-liquids. And as the newest scientist on the Svarozhich Project, she wanted to appear professional in every respect.

‘About thirty litres of material,’ she estimated for the benefit of the

recorder. ‘Viscous liquid with a high surface tension. Evidently an acellular protoctist in its plasmodial phase.’

That certainly sounds more professional than ‘puddle of stinking ooze’, she thought.

‘Though evidently identical to samples found —’

She hesitated, trying to remember the coordinates of the grid system she had yet to master.

‘Elsewhere,’ she concluded lamely before the pause became too long, ‘there is no slime trail to indicate how it came to be here.’

Remembering to tap the key that would save the hand-held sensor’s readings and attach them to her verbal report, Flora shut the recorder off.

‘David, Kern, don’t bother trying to mop this up,’ she said, snapping her sample case shut. ‘Use the seam welding torches and burn it.’

‘Burn it?’ Kern echoed.

‘It may present a health hazard,’ Flora answered as she rose.

‘You don’t know that,’ Kern said, looking at the small lake of ooze.

‘Best be safe,’ Flora said. She pointed to the stubby welding torches in the hand truck. ‘Burn. Sterilise the area.’

Both men nodded, acknowledging the orders.

With a nod of her own, Flora slipped the strap of her kit onto her shoulder and stepped off to find the badge-less work crew.

‘Hold a bit, David,’ she heard Kern say behind her. ‘Take a look at this.’

Flora hesitated a half-step, torn between curiosity and duty. Shaking her head, she quickened her pace. She'd promised to help Melva and had already delayed too long.

'Stop.'

Tegan froze instantly, aware of Nyssa doing the same. The command had come from behind, so she was not surprised to see the Doctor turn to face whoever had ordered them to be still.

'Hello,' he said, smiling brightly. 'I'm afraid my companions and I are a bit misplaced. Perhaps you could —'

A harsh click echoed flatly off the metal walls.

'Or perhaps not,' the Doctor amended quickly. He began to thrust his hands into his pockets, but evidently thought better of it. 'Tegan, Nyssa, with our host's permission, of course, I think you should turn around.'

Not wanting to offend anyone imposing enough to give the Doctor pause, Tegan rotated slowly in place. A giant. Actually, a giantess. The ebony woman stood head and shoulders taller than the Doctor and was muscled like a Amazonian warrior. Her sheer scale made the levelled pistol in her hand superfluous.

It took Tegan a moment to realise that the two children flanking the giantess were armed and uniformed men of normal stature.

'I promise you we mean no harm,' the Doctor said earnestly. 'We are

strangers here.'

'Strangers?' asked a woman's voice from behind the three soldiers.

'How do strangers get down here?'

'Purely by accident, I assure you,' the Doctor answered as a blonde woman — of normal size, Tegan was relieved to see — in white coveralls stepped into view.

'Who are you?' the huge woman asked in a level contralto. 'And what are you doing here?'

'I'm the Doctor,' the Doctor explained. 'These are my companions, Nyssa and Tegan. As for what we are doing here...' The Doctor shrugged eloquently and this time did thrust his hands in his pockets. 'We evidently took a wrong turn on our way to Prague.'

'Well, you only missed by about half a dozen kilometres.' The blonde woman smiled as she extended her hand. 'I'm Dr Jane Flora, the project

biologist. Call me Jane, Doctor...?'

'Just "Doctor" will do,' he said to Flora. 'And I'm pleased to make your acquaintance as well.'

'This is Jasmine Yannis, Anwar Eisenberg and Yankel Abubakar,' Flora introduced them with a wave of her free hand.

The three guards neither blinked nor lowered their weapons.

'Charmed,' Tegan said, beaming her most professional smile. *Please place all trays and seatbacks in their upright positions, the plane will be crashing momentarily.*

Nyssa bobbed something between a nod and a bow.

‘That is a projectile weapon,’ the Doctor observed, speaking to Yannis. ‘No stun setting, I imagine?’

‘If’ want you to live,’ the giantess said with a shrug, ‘I’ll shoot you in the leg.’

‘Of course.’

‘Now we go to meet Chief Hill.’

‘By all means,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Lead the way.’

Yannis smiled slightly.

‘Or perhaps we should precede you,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Since you’re blocking that direction, I assume we should go this way?’

‘Come along,’ Flora said, glancing at the massive sergeant in evident exasperation. ‘I’ll show you the way.’

The Doctor fell in step with the scientist, Tegan and Nyssa following at their heels.

‘Excuse my asking,’ Flora said after a dozen silent paces. ‘But is that a stalk of celery you’re wearing?’

‘Wonderful vegetable, celery.’ The Doctor hooked a thumb under the lapel of his coat to better display his boutonnière. ‘A powerful restorative,

a soothing palliative and — once it’s turned purple, of course — wonderful for the teeth.’

Flora laughed. ‘Celery has none of those properties.’

‘Another of those little physiological differences that makes life on

Earth so fascinating.'

'What?'

But the Doctor's attention was evidently caught by a machine suspended from the high ceiling.

'An air scrubber, the third in as many minutes,' he said. 'And I notice everything, including those ersatz skylights, is on temporary mounts.'

'All of this will be gone soon,' Flora explained. 'These tunnels will be filled with circulating magma when Project Svarozhich is complete.'

'Svarozhich?' asked the Doctor. 'The newborn sun, returning from the winter solstice? That explains a great deal.'

David Wingate and Kern Shaw stepped off the lift into the busy habitat corridor, carrying a sealed container between them.

'Shaw?'

Pausing, the two turned to face Supervisor Fatima Peterson. 'Weren't you guys helping Flora?' she asked.

'We still are,' Kern answered. 'Supposed to drop this sample off.'

'What is it, swamp mud?' Peterson asked, waving at the air in front of her nose. 'Get that stuff down to the labs.'

Neither man moved.

'Back on the lift,' she prompted. 'You came to habitat, where the people live. You need to go down. Past administration, past operations,

down to the labs. Shoo.'

With evident reluctance, Kern and David backed into the lift car, their heavy burden sloshing between them. Kern caught the door as it began to close, holding it open.

‘I’ve forgotten which lab is Dr Flora’s.’

‘Four one seven.’

‘Right,’ Kern stretched the word out doubtfully.

‘I don’t know that one,’ David said, frowning.

‘You got a sec, Supe?’ Kern asked. ‘Maybe you could show us.’

‘You’re kidding? You’re not kidding.’ Peterson looked at her wristwatch, then glanced down the crowded corridor towards the commissary. ‘Yeah, I guess I’ve got a minute.’

Kern moved to the back of the lift, dragging the heavy container.

‘You guys might want to get cleaned up after you deliver that stuff,’ Peterson said as she stepped aboard the car. ‘The stink is sticking to you.’ David pushed the elevator button without a word.

The doors slid silently shut.

Watching the two men on her monitors, Chief Hill was glad Director Abloran was seven kilometres above her and Dr Walters eight hundred metres below. Without Svarozhich between them they would have come to blows. On the other hand, if they could have been in the same room, they could have resolved their differences without requiring her to watch.

Technically she was part of the decision-making process, but in this

she

— and the technicians unfortunate enough to be on watch with her —

could only stand by as the two men filled her Emergency Response

Centre with circular vitriol, rehearsing the same argument for the dozenth

time. ‘No more digging until this phenomenon has been thoroughly

studied,’ Dr Walters repeated his side of the debate. ‘Life forms this deep

are unheard of.’

‘The only delay I will sanction —’ the director completed his side of

the circle is the barest minimum necessary to destroy the threat.’

And repeat...

Hill almost grinned at Sergeant Yannis as the huge woman ushered

the intruders into the room. Any interruption was an improvement.

‘Director Abloran, Dr Walters,’ she broke into their cycle. ‘If you’ll

excuse me, a security issue has arisen requiring my attention.’

Dr Walters severed his connection without a word, but the director

remained online. ‘What sort of issue?’ he asked.

‘Director Abloran?’ With a smile to Hill she no doubt thought was

sufficient apology, Dr Flora stepped forward and indicated the strangers

with a wave. ‘This is the Doctor and his assistants, Nyssa and Tegan.’

‘Chief Hill will forgive me if I usurp her position and ask that you

explain yourself,’ Abloran said.

The stranger glanced about, smiling at Hill for the first time, while

obviously deciding what to say.

‘We were bound for Prague when our transport took a wrong turn,’ he said at last. ‘No doubt drawn by the intense magnetic quality of duratherm alloy.’

‘What sort of conveyance accidentally deposits you eight kilometers underground?’

‘Well…’ the Doctor answered. ‘It’s complicated.’

Abloran sat back in his chair. ‘A vehicle? Or a teleportation device?’

‘A bit of both,’ the stranger admitted. ‘And more. And neither. It’s rather complex.’

‘And no doubt the Ministry of Research requires you to misdirect when questioned.’ Abloran raised a hand, forestalling comment. ‘I quite appreciate the security restrictions you must be under.’

‘Sir?’

Abloran smiled at Hill’s stunned expression.

‘Every ministry has their own secrets,’ he said. ‘I’m sure Research has little idea Svarozhich exists. Right, Doctor?’

‘Well, I have heard nothing about a geothermal generator of this size,’ the Doctor confirmed.

‘Ah.’ Abloran sounded impressed. ‘Geophysics is your speciality?’

‘I’m more of a generalist, actually.’

An evasion, Hill was sure.

‘I hope your general interests include wildlife and bioelectric control

circuits,' Abloran said. 'We're having a bit of trouble with both.'

'Wildlife?'

'Cockroaches and slime mould,' Flora answered. 'Not a spectacularly diverse ecology.'

'Bioelectrics is one of my specialities,' the younger of the two women spoke up.

'Excellent.' Abloran all but beamed.

'Dr Flora, I think you should give our colleagues from the Ministry of Research a tour of the entire complex,' he said.

'Is that wise?' Hill asked. 'Sir?'

'Perfectly safe,' Abloran said. 'Dr Flora will be with them. Perhaps fresh eyes will see a solution.'

His broad smile remained in place until the door had closed behind the biologist and the strangers.

'Well timed with the objection, Hill.' he said. 'Thank you for letting me play the caricature.'

'Almost missed what you were on about, sir,' she admitted. 'It took me a moment to realise you weren't that stupid.'

'I won't examine that statement too closely...' Abloran smiled slightly. 'But I'll bet my pension the Ministry of Research has never heard of this Doctor.'

'About that, sir,' Yannis spoke up. 'He didn't actually say—'

‘It doesn’t matter what he said,’ Abloran dismissed the issue. ‘Chief Hill, while Dr Flora is keeping our guests occupied, take your team down to level 77 and find out how they got inside Svarozhich.’

‘This "transport" of his?’

‘Transport, tunnel or parcel post.’ Abloran reached forward to cut the connection. ‘However they got in: find it and make sure they can never use it again.’

* * *

‘We need to pull the filters on all these units,’ Supervisor Peterson said. ‘And reverse the compression tank flow-through regulators.’

‘Ma’am?’ asked one of the service techs in her ad hoc work detail.

Cole, Peterson read from his ident badge. ‘None of us is certified on the air scrubbers.’

Peterson sighed heavily.

‘To flush the contaminants out of the air system, all of the air circulators have to be replumbed and the whole system back flushed at the same time.’

She waved her computer tablet, indicating the web of air ducts leading away from the cleaning station.

‘Otherwise we’ll never be rid of this swamp gas. Operations are halted until we get this problem solved. And we’ve been pressed into service

because retooling all the scrubbers is too big a job for the vent techs to

do on time all by their lonesomes.'

She saw nods of understanding throughout her crew. All but Cole

began pulling equipment from the hand trucks and setting to work.

Peterson waved the tech closer.

'You have a question?' she asked quietly.

'I'd feel better if I could see some work orders.'

'Don't blame you,' she smiled reassuringly. 'I'll do you one better.'

Turning away, she raised her voice to address two technicians pushing a

hand truck laden with a single sample crate.

'David, Kern, you guys are going upstairs?'

'Yes, ma'am,' David answered. 'Have to deliver this.'

'Why don't you take Cole up with you? He needs to talk with

Dispatch.'

'That's not really necessary,' Cole said.

Peterson waved away his objection without looking at him.

'We were told to get this sample to Chief Hill as soon as possible,'

Kern said.

'Well, Hill can wait.' Peterson's smile didn't waver. 'Take care of Cole

first.'

'Come on, then.'

'I can find my own way,' Cole said.

‘Right,’ Peterson agreed, nodding him towards David and Kern. ‘See you when you get back.’

Still assuring Kern and David the trip wasn’t necessary, Cole followed the two men as they lifted their sample crate off the hand truck and disappeared into the lift.

The sound of rubber tyres on metal caught Peterson’s ear before the whine of a tiny electric motor reached her. Turning, Peterson’s eyes hardened as she recognised Dr Flora at the controls, but the three passengers were new to her. A tall man, blond, wearing an improbably cut long coat and striped trousers, sat next to Flora; two women rode in the seat behind.

The younger one was observing their surroundings with what Peterson recognised as the sharp interest of a scientist.

‘Hello, Fatima,’ Flora said with her annoying familiarity as the cart coasted to a stop.

‘Ma’am.’

‘This is the Doctor.’

The man extended his hand. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Miss…?’

‘Peterson,’ she answered, extending her own hand. ‘Supervisor Peterson.’

She almost yelped as their hands made contact. There was something alien to the Doctor’s touch. A sensation of strangeness, palpable as an electric shock, which made her skin crawl. It was all she

could do not to snatch her hand out of his grip.

The Doctor seemed to notice nothing amiss, smiling warmly as he introduced the two women.

Bemused by the alien sensation, Peterson missed their names entirely.

‘These are the atmosphere-recycling pumps that circulate our air through the scrubbers,’ Flora said, indicating the bank of boxy machines.

‘The original shafts to the surface are shuttered; Svarozhich is completely self-contained.’

‘To conserve energy,’ the younger woman said.

‘I’m wasting your time explaining things you already understand.’

‘Nonsense,’ the Doctor answered. ‘You’re an informative and entertaining tour guide.’

‘I feel more an estate agent.’ The scientist smiled. ‘I should be effusing about closet space and enumerating electrical outlets.’

‘Closet space might not be amiss,’ the Doctor said. ‘You said the protoctists first appeared in a storage room?’

‘For unprocessed samples,’ Flora nodded.

‘Samples of what?’

‘Atypical ores.’ She waved towards the wall of the corridor. ‘Most rock is simply ground up and compressed to fill voids —’

‘There are caves this far down?’ the younger woman asked.

‘The Earth is not the featureless solid people on the surface think,’

Peterson interjected. ‘It is a labyrinth of halls and chambers; some quite

beautiful.’

‘They hit quite a warren in these lower levels just before I arrived,’

Flora added. ‘Filled with toxic gas, if I’ve got the story right.’

‘Interesting,’ the Doctor said, frowning. ‘And the equipment problems

began during the construction of these lower levels?’

‘About then, yes.’

‘You have a theory, Doctor?’ the short-haired woman asked.

‘Rather discarding one,’ he answered. ‘We’re too deep for a Silurian

colony, particularly with the toxic gas. And a bit too far south, now that I

think of it.’

‘Everyone is moving south these days,’ Flora said. ‘The

meteorological prognosticators are predicting another ice age.’

‘They’re right,’ the Doctor said absently.

‘What?’

‘Sorry, lost the thread for a moment.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘You were

explaining the samples?’

‘Shales, I think; I’m not a geologist,’ Flora said. ‘Something

unexpected at any rate.’

‘And the unexpected is sent to Dr Walters’s assay department?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Just ahead here?’

‘No, it’s six floors up.’ Flora pointed vaguely. ‘I could take you by after...’

‘Quite all right, I think I’ll pop up now,’ the Doctor stepped off the electric cart, stretching to save a step as he pressed the call button by the lift door. ‘Tegan, Nyssa, you’ll be all right with Dr Flora?’

‘Doctor, I really don’t think —’ the biologist began.

‘Not to worry,’ the Doctor said airily as the doors opened on an empty car. ‘I’m sure I’ll find my way.’

He included Peterson in his parting smile as the elevator doors slid shut.

‘Is he always like that?’ Flora asked.

‘Incessantly,’ answered the woman with short hair.

‘Come on,’ Flora said. ‘The personnel lifts are glacial. If we hurry we’ll get there just after.’

Releasing the hand brake, Flora surprised Peterson by executing a neat U-turn without hitting anything.

‘So long, Fatima,’ she called over her shoulder as the cart rolled back the way it had come.

Peterson stood looking after the departing women for a long moment, her hand resting on the tiller of the truck Kern and David had abandoned.

Something wiggled against her palm.

Lifting her hand, she watched with interest as a cockroach raced

down the handle. Dropping the last dozen centimetres to the floor, the

insect scurried away — keeping to the shadows, but moving faster than

a man could run.

Peterson turned back to supervise her work crew.

Dr Walters's assay lab was an unroofed room marked off from the

rest of the tunnel by temporary walls, lit by yet another false skylight. It

was furnished with several high metal tables and a single desk with one

wheeled chair. There was ample room for the four of them to explore, but

every available surface was cluttered with instruments and bits of rock.

Dozens of boxes, looking disturbingly like plastic coffins, were stacked

against the tunnel wall.

'What do you make of this?'

Tegan turned from her examination of the desk clutter to see the

Doctor peering closely at something on one of the partitions. She moved

to stand by him, but saw only a shiny blackish-brown oval some six

centimetres long.

It moved.

'Oh!' Tegan jumped back. 'That's a cockroach.'

'More specifically, a *Periplaneta americana* — a misnomer since the

species originated in north Africa,' the Doctor lectured cheerfully. 'A bit

smaller than the *Macropanesthia rhinoceros* native to your Australia, but

still a fascinating creature.'

'I don't call them fascinating,' Tegan said, hugging her arms. She backed until she bumped into Walters's desk. 'I call them disgusting.'

'Nonsense.' The Doctor sounded genuinely surprised. 'Cockroaches are perfectly adapted to their purpose, fulfilling their role in the ecosystem with a thoroughness and unrelenting diligence that's positively inspiring.'

'Oh, well, of course, when you put it *that* way,' Tegan said. 'They're disgusting.'

'Does it have suction cups?' Nyssa asked, peering closely at the climbing insect.

Something dark scuttled across the desk and Tegan's yelp drowned Flora's answer. She jumped to the centre of the room, stamping and swatting at her clothes.

'Tegan?'

She looked up to see the three looking at her. She stopped jumping and smoothed at her clothes with her palms.

'There was a cockroach on the desk,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster. 'I thought it might have got on me.'

'This?' Nyssa asked. She shocked Tegan by picking up the brown shape. 'It's a bit of oily shale.'

'It moved,' Tegan said, knowing she sounded childish.

'I'm sure it seemed to,' the Doctor said. 'Phobias often trigger

momentary illusions.'

Nyssa let the small stone roll from her fingers. It clattered on the metal desktop.

'Maybe that's not what I saw move,' Tegan conceded. 'But there was a roach on the desk.'

'Quite possible,' the Doctor agreed. 'I believe the adage is every one you see indicates a hundred you don't.'

Tegan shuddered.

Thrusting his hands deep in his pockets, the Doctor turned back to the insect he'd been studying.

'Of course,' he said thoughtfully, as it disappeared over the top of the partition. 'Their narrow adaptation raises the question of what cockroaches are doing *here*.'

'Same thing they do everywhere else, I'd imagine,' Tegan answered, unable to stop scanning the floor for signs of movement. 'Spreading disease and hiding in people's shoes.'

'Cockroaches are precisely suited to their ecosystem,' the Doctor said, beginning his own search of the floor. 'They live exclusively on cellulite.'

'What?'

'Excuse me, Tegan,' the Doctor said. 'I meant cellulose.'

'You did that on purpose,' she accused.

'Probably,' he admitted. His smile disappeared. 'However,

cockroaches require vegetable fibre. Everything I've seen since we arrived, including the clothing, is either metal or plastic.'

'Wait a moment.' Nyssa frowned. 'Plastics are petroleum products. How can there be plastics if Earth is so petroleum-poor?'

'We mine old landfills for raw plastics and reprocess them,' Flora explained.

'You mean recycling finally caught on?' Tegan asked.

The biologist regarded her blankly.

'The important point,' the Doctor said, peering under a table, 'is that there is nothing in Svarozhich for the cockroaches to feed on.'

Nyssa and Flora exchanged a look of sudden realisation. Without a word they joined the Doctor in his search.

'What does what you said mean?' Tegan asked.

'Either there's something to eat we don't know about,' Flora said. 'Or these are very unusual cockroaches.'

The Doctor nodded. 'A close examination of one of those cockroaches should provide valuable information.'

A scuttle of brown movement caught Tegan's eye.

'There! Behind those boxes.' She pointed. 'One just went between them and the wall.'

The Doctor eyed the head-high stack of sample crates doubtfully. 'One hundred kilograms each?'

'That's their capacity,' Flora answered. 'No telling what's inside.'

‘Since it’s unlikely the cockroach will surrender of its own accord,’ the Doctor said, reaching up to grip one end of the top box, ‘you three get that end, I have this.’

‘There might be roaches on the boxes.’

‘Tegan.’

‘Oh, all right.’ She took her place beside Nyssa and braced to shove the heavy crate. ‘But if one of those nasty —’

The crate slid at their first push, toppling from the pile.

‘One hundred kilos?’ the Doctor asked. ‘It weighs 15 at most.’

‘And those aren’t rocks inside,’ Flora said. ‘It sounded more like sliding leather.’

‘Leather?’ The Doctor’s face became grim. ‘You might need to prepare yourselves.’

Prepare ourselves?’ Tegan asked.

‘If I’m right, what we find inside this box will not be pleasant.’

Tegan was aware of Nyssa looking to her and of Flora frowning at the sample crate. Something unpleasant…

‘Well, let’s get it open, then,’ she said.

Sitting on her heels at her end of the box, she undid the hasp and looked up at the Doctor.

After a moment’s hesitation, he dropped to one knee at his end and copied her action.

‘Ready?’

‘Ready,’ she answered.

Together they threw back the lid.

‘Oh, no,’ Flora said faintly.

‘A mummy?’ Nyssa asked.

‘No,’ the Doctor drew the word out. ‘A far more recent corpse. But the body’s been desiccated, all moisture removed.’

Dried, the corpse was not as frightening as Tegan had feared. It looked more like leather or — her stomach lurched — beef jerky than a person. ‘Do you know who this is?’ the Doctor asked Flora.

‘Kern. Kern Shaw.’ Flora shook herself visibly. ‘But I spoke with him earlier today.’

The Doctor bent over the body and rapped sharply on the skull with his knuckle. The hollow *thock* reminded Tegan of testing a coconut’s ripeness. ‘The brain is missing,’ the Doctor said.

‘What?’ Flora’s voice was faint as she stared into the crate. ‘How?’

‘The brain is mostly liquid,’ he explained. ‘Whatever desiccated the body absorbed the brain tissue.’

‘The question is,’ Nyssa said, ‘was it absorbed with the neuron patterns intact?’

‘Why is that the question?’ Tegan asked.

‘If the neuron matrix was removed intact,’ Nyssa explained, ‘it’s

possible to decode the brain’s stored information; read its memories.’

‘I think we already know the answer to that,’ the Doctor said. ‘Dr

Flora, you say you were conversing with Kern hours ago?'

'If that,' she confirmed.

'And he seemed perfectly normal?'

'Yes.'

'This man has been dead some days,' the Doctor said, not ungently.

'Whatever you were speaking to was not Kern Shaw. But something that

retained enough of his memories to impersonate him.'

'Do you have the picture, Director?' Hill spoke softly into her

headset's microphone.

'Yes.' Abloran's voice was tinny in her ear. 'But I'm not sure what I'm

looking at.'

Hill directed Abubakar to point the camera at the structure in the

centre of the corridor.

'That is a large blue box,' she said softly into the microphone. 'From

its location — and from the fact there is nothing like it in any Svarozhich

manifest — I believe this is the Doctor's transport.'

'And those moving shapes by it?' the director asked.

'Still working that out,' Hill answered.

Making sure Abubakar understood to keep the camera trained on the

figures ahead, she led Yannis and Eisenberg forward.

The stacks of dismantled wall sections offered precious little cover,

but the security team made the best of it as they moved from pile to pile.

The roughly human figures surrounding the blue box were not men.

They were featureless; faceless man-shapes formed of clay. Their arms

ended not with hands but tools — Hill saw mallets, pickaxes and blades

— with which they were attacking the box.

As she watched, one liquefied into an ooze that flowed up and over

its surface, probing for openings.

Eisenberg caught Hill's arm and pointed to a long, narrow shadow

along the base of the far wall. Only it wasn't a shadow, she saw; it was a

river. Thousands of cockroaches rushing in a narrow, frantic stream that

stretched from somewhere beyond the blue crate past them to —

Abubakar flailing wildly at the cockroaches swarming up his body.

Yannis reached him first, all thought of stealth abandoned as she beat at

the creatures covering her friend.

'Watch *them*,' Hill ordered, pointing.

Eisenberg nodded and turned away. Bracing against a stack of wall

frames, he levelled his sidearm at the man-things attempting to breach

the Doctor's transport.

Hill was at Yannis's side a second later, frantically slapping at

cockroaches that clung to Abubakar as though welded in place. Before

her eyes the insects seemed to flow together, melting from a swarm into

a contiguous black-brown shell encasing her man from head to feet.

Tankel!' she shouted.

If Abubakar could hear her through the shroud of insects, he gave no sign. His struggles became feeble as more insects layered his form.

Hill brought her foot down hard, crushing a cockroach against the metal plate. Her shoe slid on a slick of slime. Almost immediately the greasy smear reformed into a cockroach and launched itself at the still form of Abubakar.

'Eisenberg, fall back at the double,' Hill called, relieved to see he was free of bugs. 'We're clearing the area.'

Eisenberg nodded. Keeping his weapon trained in the general direction of the blue box, he began backing quickly down the tunnel.

'Yannis, break off,' Hill ordered. Then: 'Jasmine, stop!'

Grabbing the huge woman's arm with both hands, Hill was pulled through another futile slap at the swarming roaches before Yannis looked at her.

'We need to get out of here before they go for one of us. Move.'

Yannis blinked at her, then at the shifting pile of insects covering Abubakar. Eyes fierce, she nodded once and headed for the exit.

'Flora to Emergency Response,' Flora said, holding down the gold button on the plastic rectangle pinned to the front of her coveralls. Her

ident badge, she had called it. 'Melva, are you there?'

'No doubt the antenna wires have been cut,' the Doctor said, moving

to examine a stack of sample crates. ‘I’m sure they’ve thoroughly infiltrated Svarozhich.’

‘They?’

The Doctor braced himself for a moment, then shoved against the crates. The entire stack shifted.

‘Too light,’ he confirmed. ‘I’m afraid Kern Shaw is not the only person who’s been replaced.’

‘Very good, Doctor.’

Tegan turned to see a vaguely familiar man in the doorway. One of the ones she’d seen arguing on the monitors?

‘Dr Walters!’ Flora’s voice was flooded with relief. ‘Something horrible has happened. We need to get word to the director.’

‘Something horrible has indeed happened,’ Walters said. ‘And Director Abloran will know soon enough what we have done to set it right.’

Tegan glanced at the Doctor and Nyssa. Neither moved, their hard looks confirming her own fear.

‘We must hurry,’ Flora said, heading towards the door.

‘Stop.’ Tegan caught her arm.

‘What?’

‘That’s not Walters,’ the Doctor said. ‘Walters’s body is in one of these

crates.’

The figure blocking the door smiled grimly.

‘I am called the Doctor,’ the Doctor said. ‘What might your name be?’

‘Szlth’TOK.’

The sound sent a twinge through the hinge of Tegan’s jaw. Like a bite of bitter lemon.

‘Will “Tock” do?’ the Doctor asked. ‘I don’t think I can manage that first part.’

‘Tock.’ The heavy shoulders shrugged eloquently. ‘As good an appellation as any.’

‘Tock, then,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘This great wrong that was done — the invasion of your home?’

‘Very good, again, Doctor.’ Tock smiled, stepping fully into the room. ‘Though that’s only part of it. You’re much quicker on the uptake than these humans.’

‘Quicker than humans?’ Flora asked.

‘The Doctor here is not of this Earth,’ Tock said. ‘He is not part of us. It hurts to touch him.’

‘Sorry. I never intend to cause pain.’

Tock considered. ‘I believe you.’

‘If you’re not human,’ Flora asked. ‘What are you?’

‘A Time Lord,’ the Doctor said.

‘A Time Lord?’ asked Tock. ‘That would imply one who travels in time.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And you have said you find the study of life on Earth fascinating,’

Tock said. ‘How is it you do not know of me?’

‘I’m not sure,’ the Doctor said, frowning. ‘But now that I think about it,

I’m not sure I *don’t* know you as well. You are native to Earth?’

‘We are *the* natives of Earth.’ Tock spread his arms to embrace the

tunnels and stone around them. ‘Before the humans, before the ancient

races, before any life of rigid form, we were here.’

‘Life of rigid form?’ the Doctor echoed. ‘You mean solid. In your

natural state you’re liquid?’

‘We are always liquid,’ Tock corrected. ‘To appear solid, we must bind

particles of earth — clay, dust, ash — into the shape which best suits our

purpose.’

‘Formed of earth itself,’ the Doctor said, wonder in his voice. ‘A truly

geotic life form.’

‘Thousands of years ago the humans of this region knew us,’ Tock

said. ‘They honoured us, respected our ways. As long as they dwelt on

the surface, there was no conflict between us. Even when they began

digging in the Earth, taking copper and silver and iron from the ground —

stone for their buildings — they asked. They accepted our guidance;

respected our borders.’

‘What changed?’

The Doctor’s voice seemed to pull Tock back into the underground

laboratory.

‘More humans came,’ he said. ‘Strangers to this place. They took what they wanted. From the humans who lived on the surface, from the Earth, and from us. They did not honour us. They called us unnatural. We became demons of their mythology.’

‘Of course!’

The Doctor looked to Tegan, clearly expecting her to share his epiphany.

Tegan flinched as a dark brown shape scurried into the room. Without hesitation, the cockroach ran to Tock and disappeared beneath the cuff of his trousers. The man — or the creature that had taken the shape of a man — paused, his eyes unfocused.

‘It seems the Emergency Response Department has discovered we exist,’ he said, lowering his arms.

The lifeless eyes he turned on Flora were hard with hate.

‘Soon someone will recall your plan to burn us with welding torches.’ He smiled without warmth. ‘But we have time enough to complete our preparations before they organise an effective offence.’

The cockroach appeared by his foot again, followed by a second and then a third. With unnatural speed the insects ran from the room.

‘That’s how you communicate, isn’t it?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Bits of yourself packed with copies of specific memories.’

‘Doctor?’ Nyssa asked.

‘They are liquid, able to exchange portions of themselves,’ the Doctor

explained. ‘Near each other they need only touch. When separated, they

fashion insects to convey the packets of information.’

Tegan looked to the cluttered desk. She was not surprised to see the brown stone was gone. Both she and Nyssa had been correct about it being a cockroach.

A man — one of the security guards who had captured them on their arrival — appeared behind Tock.

Tegan’s flare of hope died as his complete lack of expression registered. The guard stepped close to Tock, extending a single finger to

touch his bare neck. Had he been human when she’d met him?

The guard dropped his hand and Tock turned to face Tegan and Flora. ‘Your replacements will be here momentarily.’

‘But none for Nyssa and myself?’ the Doctor guessed.

‘You are not of the Earth,’ Tock confirmed. ‘We cannot comprehend you.’

‘You have tried this before,’ the Doctor said. ‘Fighting humans by taking on their form. It didn’t work thousands of years ago. It cannot work

now.’

‘I thought you had not heard of us.’

‘As a race, no,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘But as a mythology unique to this region of Europe. Men formed of earth.

‘You are Golem.’

‘Indeed.’

Golem?

Tegan stared. She’d always thought golem had been invented by the cinema. Like zombies.

‘Hold it!’ The voice echoed from some distance down the hall. ‘Set those buckets down and put your hands over your heads.’

The copy of the security guard drew his sidearm, but made no other move. Tegan understood the warning and kept quiet.

‘It seems we will have to do without your replacements,’ Tock said conversationally. ‘Two fewer workers will make no difference now.’

‘But you can make a difference,’ the Doctor said. ‘You fought the humans before and lost. It’s not too late to keep from repeating the same

mistake.’

‘We do not intend to fight them,’ Tock said. ‘We intend to exterminate them.’

His hand flowed and changed, becoming an undulating disc of flesh as wide as a dinner plate.

‘We use this air only to speak to you,’ Tock said, stepping towards Tegan. ‘Deprive a human of its air, however —’

‘Freeze!’

‘Chief Hill!’ Tock exclaimed, sounding like a delighted Walters. His hand became instantly normal as he turned towards the door. ‘Do not breathe deeply. There seems to be an airborne hallucinogenic —’

‘Shut up,’ said Hill flatly.

Tock shut up.

‘Chief, am I glad —’

Hill swung her weapon towards the ersatz security guard. Tegan saw it was not a proper gun but a gas cylinder with a fluted nozzle. The welding torch Tock had mentioned?

‘Drop the gun.’

‘Chief?’ the security guard asked in hurt tones. ‘It’s me.’

Abubakar’s camera kept transmitting after he dropped it,’ Hill said. ‘We know what you are.’

The Golem dropped the gun without a word and raised his hands.

The huge Yannis and another guard — both armed with torches — appeared, flanking a man no taller than Tegan’s elbow. The newcomer radiated authority despite his lack of height, and the fury in his glare was palpable.

Tegan was startled to recognise Director Abloran.

‘These men were friends of ours,’ he snapped at the Golem. ‘Don’t mock them by hiding behind their faces.’

Tock and the other did not answer directly, but their faces begin to

change — smoothing into generic masks devoid of identity and character.

‘I knew the problem began here,’ Abloran said, looking at the stacks

of crates lining the walls.

‘It can end here,’ Yannis spoke up — her glare fixed on the Golem in the guard’s uniform. ‘We can burn these right now then look in the boxes to see who else they’ve replaced.’

‘There are thousands of places to hide bodies down here,’ Abloran countered. ‘We may never know how many people were killed by these murderers.’

‘ *Us* murderers?’ Tock’s low voice scraped like gravel, all trace of his Walters persona gone. ‘ *You* invaded *our* world. *You* slaughtered *us* by the hundreds. *You* threaten *us* with extinction. *You* are monsters who deserve to die.’

‘Wait!’ Moving quickly, the Doctor got between the two, his hands upraised. ‘No one else need die. You can choose to stop this.’

‘Choose to stop?’ Abloran demanded. ‘Because of this creature’s lies?’

‘The Golem have lived here for millennia,’ the Doctor said. ‘They harmed no one —’

‘That we know of.’

‘They harmed no one until your drills ripped into their world and you began packing the portions you did not need with rubble.’

‘Are you siding with these creatures?’

‘I am trying to get you to see that they do have a side,’ the Doctor said. Abloran looked from the Doctor to Tock and seemed to gather

himself. ‘So?’ he demanded. ‘They lived in these caves. We have a power plant to build. They can move to other caves.’

‘We cannot,’ Walters answered flatly.

Abloran opened his mouth, but Flora cut off whatever he meant to say. ‘Black smokers!’

‘What?’

‘Some deep sea life forms can live only around volcanic vents — black smokers — in the ocean floor,’ Flora explained. ‘Chemosynthesis.

A very specialised ecology.’

‘This region is not volcanic.’

‘The point being,’ the Doctor pointed out, ‘those toxic gasses you keep flushing are unique to this region and essential to the Golem’s survival. They can live nowhere else.’

Abloran frowned.

‘Given any of this is true,’ he said, ‘it changes nothing. We need the energy Svarozhich will provide to survive.’

‘A geothermal magma pump is not the only way to produce energy,’ the Doctor pointed out. ‘Only the most efficient. This is not a question of

balancing your survival against the Golem’s. It’s a question of whether

you believe saving money justifies exterminating an entire race of people.’

Abloran rocked back slightly.

‘It makes no difference,’ Tock spoke up.

‘It will.’ The Doctor raised a finger. ‘If you halt what you’re doing.’

‘Doing?’

‘Extermination. You implied it was imminent.’

Tock said nothing.

Yannis growled and raised her torch, aiming it at the head of the Golem that had been Abubakar.

‘Wait,’ the Doctor said, forestalling her. To Tock, he said: ‘There are crews all over Svarozhich replumbing the air scrubbers. If I had to guess — and it seems I must — you’re planning to flood the complex with your own atmosphere.’

‘You would kill all of us?’ Abloran demanded.

‘Only those underground,’ the Doctor said, not taking his eyes off Tock. ‘Think about it, Tock. Think of how all the humans above ground would react to such a slaughter.’

‘We have thought about it,’ Tock answered. ‘They will be dealt with.’

‘How?’ the Doctor asked. ‘The old air shafts to the surface? Tock, there is not enough gas in your caves to flood the whole Earth.’

‘Not the whole Earth, just the surface above our home,’ Tock said. ‘If the humans think this region is poisonous, they will go elsewhere.’

‘The "surface above your home" is Prague.’ Abloran’s voice was incredulous. ‘Poison Prague? You’ll kill millions.’

‘With the heat of your power plant you will kill all,’ Tock countered.

‘Tock, listen to me,’ the Doctor said. ‘Listen to those memories you’ve absorbed. There are billions of humans. And — much as I admire them — they are a violent and vindictive race when angered. If you kill the people living above you — kill Prague — it will be the end of the Golem.

The humans will not rest until you are all destroyed.’

Tut they destroy us now!’ Tock cried. ‘And stopping now, because of us, will change nothing. Humans have hunted us and killed us for millennia. We survive only because they no longer believe we exist. If we are known, whatever you promise now, our eventual destruction is certain.’

‘He has a point,’ Flora said. ‘Our track record is not good.’

‘There may be a way,’ Abloran said quietly.

Even the Doctor looked startled.

‘You’ll help them?’ demanded Hill. ‘Have you forgotten the people they’ve killed?’

‘I haven’t forgotten, Chief.’ Abloran sounded tired. Tut none of our lost friends would thank us if we allowed Prague to die in their name. And that’s the one sure outcome of not helping.’

‘If we could take them now —’

‘Our pumps are ready now,’ Tock said. ‘And we control your communications. Harm us, and —’

‘This is no time for threats!’ the Doctor shouted. ‘Hear each other out.’

Hill and Yannis exchanged glances, but voiced no objection.

‘What is your plan, Dr Abloran?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Svarozhich fails due to poor management — internal audit proves the project to be economically infeasible,’ the director said. ‘We pull out all the equipment, collapse the tunnels leading to the surface, abandon everything below ground.’

‘Abandon everything?’ Hill asked.

‘The government loses two per cent of its gross budget and I spend the rest of my career in disgrace,’ Abloran said. ‘In exchange we do not commit genocide and the people of Prague live. I call that a fair trade.’

‘Doctor,’ Tegan asked as they made their way back to the TARDIS, ‘didn’t you already know how this would end? You said yourself there was no record of Svarozhich in Earth’s future history.’

‘Not quite,’ the Doctor said. ‘Just as there are rules that govern what a Time Lord can do, there are rules that determine what history is recorded and how.’

‘You mean some of the histories you study could be lies?’ Nyssa asked. ‘Not at all! They are all true or they never would be recorded.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘It’s just wise to remember that the obvious truth may not be the only truth. Or even the most true.’

Tegan shook her head. ‘That doesn’t really make sense, you know.’

‘Of course it does.’

‘To completely change the subject,’ Nyssa said, ‘are you going to

teach us how to pilot the TARDIS so this doesn’t happen again?’

‘Perhaps.’ The Doctor frowned as he fished for the key, then

brightened. ‘If you want, one of you could read out the coordinates while

I input our next destination.’

Tegan rolled her eyes. ‘Be still, my heart.’

Across Silent Seas

Tim Waggoner

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,

with Jamie McCrimmon

Alone... so alone...

Once there were others, so many others... and they swam together in

absolute joy. Unbound, unfettered, thousands of bodies undulating with

slow majestic grace as the Moerani plied the unimaginable vastness that

exists between one tick of a clock and another. Free they were, and

gloriously so. More free than any creature the universe had ever known

before or would ever know again.

But then one Moerani heard a faint call coming from far away and,

curious, broke off from the pod to investigate. Though powerful beyond

measure, this Moerani was young and foolish, and as the pod continued

swimming onward in its endless circuit of creation, the youngling told

itself that it wouldn't be gone very long, that it was swift and could easily

catch up with the rest of the pod once its curiosity had been sated.

So foolish...

Now the youngling was alone, cut off from the pod, denied the

embrace of the infinite waters of eternity and the companionship of its

own kind. In its misery, the youngling sang into the void, its ululating melodies of loneliness and sorrow echoing throughout existence. But the pod had travelled too far away to hear the youngling's desperate cry for help. But someone heard.

And answered.

'Doctor! Where are you?'

'I'm right next to you, Jamie!' the Doctor shouted. Though the two travellers stood only inches apart, the cacophony of sound swirling around them made it almost impossible to hear each another. Tut your hand on my shoulder so we don't get separated!'

Seconds passed, and the Doctor feared his young companion had become too disorientated to perform such a simple action, but then he felt the Highlander's sturdy hand take hold of his left shoulder and clasp tight. The lad was strong — as well the Doctor knew from their many adventures together — and his fear only added to that strength. The boy gripped the Doctor's shoulder hard enough to make the Time Lord grit his teeth in pain. But the Doctor ignored his discomfort and soldiered on.

Reality swirled around them, space and time bending, twisting, shattering and then reforming... An insane kaleidoscope of images, sounds and sensations buffeted their minds... One instant the ground beneath their feet was barren and lifeless, the next they stood in a field

of waist-high plants that looked like crystalline flowers with silver thorns

protruding from their delicate stems. The sun blazed in the sky — a

swollen, angry red — and then it was night, and hanging above them

was a moon fissured with jagged cracks, as if the ancient satellite was on

the verge of crumbling to pieces. Wind howled, rain pelted, lightning

flashed, snow fell... The ground broke open, releasing super-heated

steam and thick lava before becoming frozen tundra, then soggy

marshland. Dragonflies with the wingspan of eagles buzzed through the

air, sounding more like small aircraft than insects. A herd of shaggy elk

large as elephants thundered past, their pounding hooves causing the

earth to tremble as if in the throes of a quake. Then huge translucent

bubbles the size of small mountains bounced slowly by, but what manner

of life form they were — if indeed, they were alive at all — not even the

Doctor could say.

‘What’s happening, Doctor?’ Jamie shouted.

‘It’s a temporal maelstrom — a time storm!’ the Doctor replied. Tut

don’t fret, Jamie — I’ll see us through!’ *I hope*, the Doctor added silently.

A biplane roared over their heads, flying so low that they both ducked

out of reflex.

‘Have you seen this kind of thing before?’ Jamie asked, a note of pleading in his voice, as if he were asking for reassurance.

‘Of course I have,’ the Doctor snapped.

Ten-foot ambulatory plants appeared and moved towards them, long whip-like tendrils waving in the air, as if casting about for prey. Then just as suddenly as the walking plants appeared, they were gone.

‘Though I must admit, I’ve never encountered anything on this scale,’ the Time Lord muttered. So far, he’d managed to steer the two of them away from the worst of the ever-changing hazards that inhabited this nightmarish timescape, but even he was beginning to become disorientated. If they didn’t find their way out of the maelstrom soon...

A huge lizard-like form materialised in front of them. It stood on two tree-trunk thick legs, possessed a mouthful of dagger-like teeth, and had a pair of ridiculous-looking vestigial forelimbs that bobbed uselessly in the air as the beast came stomping towards them. The tyrannosaur opened its maw wide and released an ear-splitting roar. Shreds of its last meal were still stuck in its teeth, and its fetid breath filled the air with the stench of rotted meat. The Doctor knew that if he didn’t do something fast, Jamie and he would end up in the belly of the ravenous monster.

Fighting against his natural instinct to flee, the Doctor closed his eyes and forced himself to remain calm. He concentrated on listening to that inner sense of temporal direction that all Time Lords possess and then,

grabbing hold of Jamie's arm, eyes still closed, the Doctor took three

rapid steps to the right, pulling his young companion along with him.

Silence. The Doctor opened his eyes.

The tyrannosaur was gone, as was the chaotic timescape that had

seethed around them. Reality had become stable once more, and the

Doctor and Jamie found themselves standing on a city pavement,

surrounded by old buildings with beautiful murals painted on them. Men,

women and children walked past them, most wearing two-piece outfits of

lightweight trans-mesh. The cloth was strong enough to deflect a bullet,

but comfortable as a pair of old pyjamas. Traffic filled the street — mostly

mag-lev transports of various types, though there were a few hydrogen-

powered internal-combustion engines in the mix — the vehicles moving

with brisk efficiency as they navigated their way through the city.

The Doctor and his companion didn't exactly blend with the crowd.

The Doctor, with his mop-top hair, hound-dog face, ill-fitting black jacket

and baggy chequered trousers, looked more like a clownish tramp than a

Time Lord. And Jamie's full Highlander dress — long-sleeved white shirt,

a length of plaid cloth worn over the shoulder and a pleated tartan kilt

—

made him stand out just as much as the Doctor. Still, no one gave them

more than a passing glance. The city folk continued on their way,

seemingly unconcerned that two odd-looking strangers had suddenly

appeared out of nowhere.

The Doctor turned to his friend and grinned. ‘There now. That wasn’t

so bad, was it?’

Jamie’s face was pale, his eyes wild and darting, like those of a horse

on the verge of bolting in terror. ‘Aye. If you say so, Doctor.’ The lad

reached up and wiped a gob of tyrannosaur saliva from his shoulder and

flung the viscous goo into the gutter. He then wiped his fingers clean on

the side of his kilt.

The Doctor pursed his lips in distaste. ‘You’ll have to run that through

the wash when we get back to the TARDIS.’

‘If we get back, you mean,’ Jamie said. Already the colour was

beginning to return to his face and his eyes no longer looked so wild.

He’d travelled with the Doctor too long to let a little time-shock get the

better of him. ‘In case you’re forgetting, we left the TARDIS in the middle

of that hell- blasted heath. Why we couldn’t have landed here…’ The lad

gestured at the street around them, his words trailing off.

The Doctor scowled. ‘I don’t know what it is with you, Jamie, always

complaining about how I control the TARDIS. If you knew anything at all

about the complexities of intertemporal trans-navigation...' He broke off

and sighed. 'Suffice it to say that the time-storm itself prevented me from

materialising any closer than we did. According to the readings I saw just

before we landed, the temporal maelstrom has engulfed the entire planet

— except for this city.'

Jamie looked around. 'Speaking of which, where exactly are we?'

The Doctor put an arm around his companion's shoulders. 'You are

standing on a street in one of my favourite places on Earth, perhaps

even in this quadrant of the galaxy. You should recognise it too, Jamie.

You've been here before — the city of Prague.'

'Prague? Where we met that... what did you call it... Hallanian?'

'That's right. I'm not sure of the year, though. So much of the historic

architecture here remained virtually unchanged throughout the centuries,

surviving even the great World Wars. Judging by the clothing styles and

the types of vehicles navigating the streets, I'd say we're in the late

twenty- first century, perhaps the early twenty-second. But whatever the

year, there is no doubt in my mind that this is Prague: the golden city,

the

city of a hundred spires. Oh, it's a sight for sore eyes, Jamie, especially

after...' He broke off, not wishing to go on, regretting that he'd said

anything at all.

'You're not still blaming yourself?' Jamie asked. 'You did what you

had to do. You had no any other choice, Doctor.'

In his mind's eye, the Doctor saw himself pushing a button. Such a

simple act, one that even a moderately trained primate could perform.

And yet, with that one action, he'd brought about the death of thousands

of innocent lives.

As if sensing the Doctor's thoughts, Jamie went on. 'Those people,

the Aeronons, they just wouldn't listen to you, would they, when you tried

to explain that they were draining too much energy from their sun. It was

going to... to...'

'Become a supernova,' the Doctor supplied.

'Aye. But it didn't because you stopped what they were doing.'

'And in so doing caused a feedback surge that destroyed power relay

stations throughout the Aeronons' star system. Thousands died in the

explosions.'

'Maybe so,' Jamie allowed. 'But you didn't know that would happen,

and you saved so many lives in the process. If you hadn't done anything,

their star system would have been destroyed, along with their entire

race.'

'I understand that, Jamie. That's why I did what I did. But it doesn't make me feel any better about the lives that were lost.' The Doctor's voice grew softer. 'I left my people, my home, because despite all their great gifts, the Time Lords refused to intervene in the affairs of what they deemed to be lesser races. At the time, I thought it narrow-minded and selfish of them. But now... now I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps they weren't right all along. That perhaps there's a good reason they don't interfere, because doing so only makes things worse.'

Jamie clapped a hand on the Doctor's shoulder. 'You can't mean that, not after all the good you've done.'

Once again, the Doctor saw his finger press down on the button, condemning thousands of Aeronons to death so that billions might live, and he couldn't find the words to reply to his companion.

A stout man with a thick walrus moustache walked towards them. He wore a black trans-mesh suit and, of all things, an old-fashioned bowler.

As he passed, he tipped his hat and nodded a greeting. The Doctor

forced himself to smile and return to the nod as the man settled the bowler back on his head and continued on his way.

'If you really believe you shouldn't interfere, then why did we come

here?' Jamie was nothing if not persistent. It was one of the lad's more endearing, if occasionally annoying, traits. 'You could've just ignored the call for help and kept on going.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Old habits die hard, I suppose.' In truth, he almost had ignored the signal when the TARDIS first picked it up. The message — which sounded more like singing than spoken words — had been in a language that not even the TARDIS could translate. But its tones had held such a mournful, lonely quality that in the end the Doctor simply had to investigate, for he well understood loneliness and was no stranger to sorrow, especially after his experience with the Aeronons.

The man in the bowler approached from the same direction as before, tipped his hat, nodded, and moved on.

The Doctor frowned as he turned to watch the man walk away. 'That's odd.'

'What?'

'That man, the one in the bowler hat. I could've sworn he'd already...'

The Doctor trailed off. The man had disappeared. Not simply turned the corner or become hidden from sight by other pedestrians. He had quite literally vanished. The Doctor spun around in time to see the same man walking towards them again. For a third time, the man tipped his hat, nodded, and kept on going.

‘Oh, dear,’ the Doctor murmured.

‘What is it?’ Jamie asked. ‘Are they… what do you call it? When there are two versions of someone?’

‘Clones,’ the Doctor supplied.

‘Aye. Is that what they are?’

For a fourth time the man approached, tipped his hat, nodded, walked on.

‘Not *they*, Jamie. *Him*. He’s caught in some sort of recursive temporal event.’ When the Doctor noticed his companion’s blank look, he added:

‘What you’re seeing is the same person, repeating the same few moments in time over and over. This is most serious. It means that whatever force has insulated Prague against the temporal maelstrom that’s engulfed the rest of the planet is losing its effectiveness. It’s only — if you’ll pardon the expression — a matter of time before the storm breaks through and overwhelms the city.’

And once that occurred, the Earth would lapse into complete temporal chaos. The Doctor didn’t know what had caused the time maelstrom, or why Prague had been able to resist the worst of its effects so far. But however that miracle had been accomplished, the city was serving as a cork in a bottle, or perhaps a better metaphor would be a finger plugging a hole in a crumbling dyke. As long as Prague stood, the raging temporal

energies surging around it would be held at bay. But once the dyke burst,

the temporal ‘waters’ would flood the city, washing it out of existence.

And when Prague was gone, the Earth itself would be destroyed. Worse,

the planet and all its history would be completely erased from time. It

would be as if the Earth and its people had never existed at all. It was

one of the Time Lords’ worst nightmares — total temporal annihilation.

He turned to his young companion. ‘Come, Jamie, let’s —’ He broke

off when he saw two men in full plasteel body armour and visored

helmets standing on either side of Jamie. One had taken hold of his arm,

and the other was walking towards the Doctor. Both men were armed

with hand-held energy weapons.

The second man grabbed hold of the Doctor’s arm and jammed the

barrel of his weapon against his side.

‘Well, this will save us some bother.’ The Doctor smiled at his captor.

‘If you wouldn’t mind, could you please take us to your leader?’

The Doctor and Jamie walked up a flight of stone steps, their two

armoured captors following close behind, energy weapons trained on

their prisoners’ backs. The men hadn’t spoken a single word since

capturing the Doctor and Jamie, and the Time Lord had given up trying

to get them to talk.

‘I don’t know where these two came from, Doctor. They just appeared out of nowhere!’

‘Why are you so surprised, Jamie? We did the same thing ourselves only a short time earlier.’

‘I’m not surprised; I’m angry! They gave me no chance to fight back. They cheated, plain and simple.’

‘This isn’t exactly a sporting event. There aren’t any rules.’

‘That’s as may be, but I don’t have to like it, do I?’ Jamie looked back over his shoulder and shot a glare at their armoured escort. If the men had any reaction to him, it was hidden by their helmets’ opaque visors.

Jamie turned forward again and continued climbing the stairs alongside the Doctor. ‘What is this place?’

‘We’re heading up to the tower roof of the Old Town Hall. You saw that clock on the outer wall of the building?’

Jamie nodded.

‘That’s the Astronomical Clock. Built in 1410, it’s one of the most famous sights in the city. Quite an extraordinary piece of workmanship, really. Every hour of the day the bells are rung by a procession of mechanical figures — the twelve apostles, followed by representations of the fifteenth century’s notion of the world’s ills: Vanity, Corruption, Greed and Death. I haven’t heard the clock toll the hour since we arrived, though. Perhaps the temporal maelstrom has interfered with its

operation. Pity. I so would've liked for you to see it in action, Jamie. Still,

once we reach the tower, we'll be able to see the mechanical figures,

even if they no longer function.'

They continued climbing for several minutes until finally they came to

the end of the stairs and stepped into the tower proper. The Doctor was

disappointed — though in truth, not surprised — to see the interior of the

tower had been changed. Banks of electronic equipment lined the walls,

connected by a network of tangled cables. The air was filled with an

almost sub-audible humming along with the acrid smell of ozone as the

machinery went about its work. In the middle of the chamber was a

raised dais ringed by glowing orbs on thin metal rods. Atop the dais was

a chair, and sitting there a man in his sixties — thin, garbed in trans-

mesh, thick white hair, neatly trimmed moustache. His face was narrow,

with high patrician cheekbones, and his eyes held a penetrating gaze

that told the Doctor this was a man of high intelligence.

But the chamber's most impressive feature rose behind the dais. A

large transparent cube filled with swirling multicoloured energy, and

floating inside ten, perhaps 12 feet long, was a creature the Doctor never

thought he'd set eyes upon, no matter how many centuries he lived.

‘It’s a Moerani,’ the Doctor whispered in awe.

‘Indeed.’ The man on the dais spoke in a soft tenor. He rose from his chair and stepped down from the dais. ‘Impressive, isn’t it?’

The Moerani resembled an Earth cetacean to some degree, but instead of eyes, it possessed a round glowing organ in the centre of its head. An organ that looked exactly like the orbs surrounding the dais. But instead of shining brightly as it should, the Moerani’s light-globe gave off only the dimmest of illumination. The Doctor wondered if that was due to the creature’s unhappiness over its captivity, or if it might be a sign of ill health. Perhaps both, he mused.

‘Truly impressive,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘From its size, I imagine it’s a youth. An adolescent, perhaps even a child.’

‘Yes.’ Their white-haired host walked up to them and stopped just out of reach. ‘I am Kemen, and for lack of a better term, I am the Earth’s… custodian, I suppose you could say. I should think it obvious, but I must warn you that if you make any sudden moves, my two associates won’t hesitate to discharge their weapons. They’re chronal accelerators: one blast and you’ll age to the point of death within seconds.’

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder. Sure enough, Kemen’s armoured servants stood directly behind them, weapons held at the ready.

‘What is that big fish, Doctor?’ Jamie asked. ‘From the way you’re

looking at it, it's either something special or dangerous.'

'Indeed.' The Doctor kept his gaze focused on the Moerani as he

spoke. 'What you are looking at, Jamie, is one of the oldest and rarest

species in this galaxy, perhaps in all creation. The Moerani live outside

normal existence in a transcendental realm called hypertime. They swim

in vast groups through that dimension on an endless migration through

the seas of eternity. According to some legends, their songs created and

sustain the universe itself.'

'You make it sound like a god,' Jamie said, gazing upon the Moerani

with newfound respect.

'You're not too far off the mark,' the Doctor said.

'I'll grant that it's a creature of great power,' Kemen said. 'But when all

is said and done, it's still just an animal.'

The Doctor glared at Kemen. 'Technically, so is your species, sir.

How would you like it if I referred to you as a nearly hairless ape?'

Kemen laughed. 'Point taken. So, whom do I have the honour of

addressing?'

'I am the Doctor, and this is my friend, Jamie. We are travellers, and

my transport picked up a distress signal — a signal, I believe, sent by the

Moerani you've imprisoned.'

‘Imprisoned is such a harsh word, Doctor,’ Kemen said. ‘Though, I suppose, not altogether inaccurate.’

‘If you’re so smart, why would you want to capture such a powerful beastie?’ Jamie asked. ‘And why would you keep it in a clock tower, of all places?’

Kemen looked at the Doctor. ‘You seem to know a great deal, sir. Can you answer your young charge’s questions?’

‘I’m still puzzling out the how of it, but the why is clear enough. You’re using these machines to drain the Moerani’s chronal energy and employing it to alter Earth’s temporal matrix. As a result, you’ve created the time storm that now rages across the face of the entire world.’

‘Except here in Prague,’ Kemen said. ‘We are, in effect, in the eye of the storm.’

‘Don’t delude yourself. The superstructure of time is already beginning to erode in the city. The eye is collapsing and, once that happens, Prague, and everything in it, will cease to exist. The planet will be completely consumed by temporal chaos.’

Kemen sighed. ‘I wish I could say otherwise, but you are correct, Doctor. That’s why, when I became aware of your presence in the city, I dispatched my servants to collect you and bring you to me. You see, I need your help.’

The Doctor snorted. ‘From what I’ve seen, the whole world needs my

help. Not that that's anything new.'

'What does this man need us for?' Jamie asked.

'Not us,' the Doctor said. 'Me. Kemen has lost control of the Moerani's

power, thus creating the temporal maelstrom. He hopes that I'll be able

to help him regain that control. Don't you?'

'As you say,' Kemen confirmed. 'Even from a distance, I could sense

your great power, Doctor. It is as if you are a temporal battery, filled to

bursting with chronal energy.'

The Doctor's eyes widened in realisation. 'You're a chronopath, aren't

you?'

'I am.'

'Now it's beginning to make sense!'

Jamie frowned. 'Maybe to you, Doctor, but not to me.'

'A chronopath is someone who possesses the psychic ability to detect

and at times subtly manipulate fluctuations in the time stream, Jamie.

Have you ever met someone who seemed to be unnaturally lucky? Who

never seemed to make a wrong decision? A gambler who always wins, a

commander who never leads his soldiers astray... such individuals are

the simplest sort of chronopath, instinctively able to anticipate and take

advantage of the ever-changing shifts in probability. In fact, my own

people had a high percentage of chronopaths in our population. That's part of what led us to the discovery and ultimate refinement of time-control technology. My guess is that Kemen here is the temporal Einstein of your race — a natural chronopathic genius.'

Kemen gave the Doctor a bow. 'You do me much credit, sir.'

'Not that much, I fear. You had to enslave a sentient being in order to achieve your facility with temporal manipulation. All the *real* Einstein ever had to do was work out a bit of mathematics on a piece of paper.'

'I consider the Moerani and myself to be partners,' Kemen said stiffly.

'Since when do you keep your partner in a cage?' Jamie demanded.

His hands balled into fists and he started forward, but the Doctor reached out and took hold of his arm, stopping him from attacking Kemen.

'Don't forget our host's servants,' the Doctor said, nodding towards the two armoured figures standing behind them, energy weapons trained and ready to fire. 'Though I should think "clean-up crew" would be a more suitable term.' Still holding tight to Jamie's arm, the Doctor turned to Kemen. 'That's their real purpose, isn't it? They patrol the city, seeking out and eradicating temporal disturbances. You're using them to try to hold the line while you attempt to sort out what's gone wrong with your homemade time experiment.'

'I thought he said their guns made people older,' Jamie said.

‘That’s true enough,’ the Doctor said. ‘But that’s just a useful side

effect, isn’t it, Kemen? A good strong blast of negative time energy is just

the thing to nullify the unstable chronal matrix of a temporal disturbance.’

‘Right again, Doctor. Your knowledge of temporal mechanics is most

impressive. But have you guessed the true nature of my servants?’

Kemen gave a nod to his men, and in unison they reached up with their

free hands and lifted their visors to reveal grotesque faces wrought from

metal instead of flesh. One was a grinning skull, the other a leering fiend.

‘Meet Death and Corruption,’ Kemen said. ‘Two of the figures that

once rang the bells here in the Astronomical Clock. I couldn’t resist using

their forms as the basis for my artificial servants.’

‘They’re mechanical men,’ said Jamie. ‘That’s not armour at all, is it?

It’s the outer shell of their bodies!’

‘I underestimated you, Kemen,’ the Doctor said. ‘It appears you’re

quite skilled in android construction as well as time technology.’

Kemen shrugged. ‘A little sideline of mine, but one that’s proven quite

useful. You’re right about the temporal disruptions in the city, and my

servants are constantly busy putting out brush fires, so to speak. The

others — those androids based on Greed, Vanity and the 12 apostles —

are out there even as we speak, trying to "hold the line", as you so eloquently said. But I fear it's a losing battle. For every temporal disruption my androids deal with, two more arise to take its place.'

'Then you must realise that whatever you're trying to accomplish with all this —' the Doctor gestured at the chamber filled with machinery it's a losing battle. You must shut this facility down and release the Moerani before it's too late!'

'That's precisely what I would do, Doctor. If I were acting out of selfish motivations. But I do what I do for the good of all humanity — past, present and future! I cannot let those countless billions down. I must find a way to make my dream a reality!'

'Not another madman with a dream!' Jamie muttered.

'Hush now,' the Doctor said, though privately he agreed with his young friend. 'So you believe you are acting for the greater good, Kemen?'

'I *know* I am! You're an intelligent man, Doctor. Tell me, what is the obligation of genius?'

The Doctor replied without hesitation. 'To be employed for the benefit of all.'

'Precisely. When as a child I realised that I could feel time the same way other people feel the wind on their face and the temperature of the air around them, I knew I was destined for great things. And as I got

older and saw so many miseries occurring around me on a daily basis —

disease, war, poverty, intolerance, a host of others — I realised that I

alone of all the people who had ever lived and died throughout history

could do something about it. I could use my chronopathic abilities to

learn to harness time, and then I could remake history and eliminate all

the mistakes, avert all the tragedies, erase all the evils. I would turn the

Earth into the utopia humanity has always dreamed of creating but fallen

so short of.'

'I think I know where this is going,' the Doctor said. 'You studied

science and engineering, began designing your temporal manipulation

devices... and when you sensed the existence of the Moerani you

realised you could use them to power your machines. You lured a young

one — for only one so young would be foolish enough to leave its pod in

response to your summons — and imprisoned it within a cage formed

from hypertime energy. I imagine you chose to locate your facility in

Prague due to its unique architecture. The entire city would act as a

focusing lens for the temporal energy you'd release. And I suspect you

used the Astronomical Clock simply out of whimsy.'

Kemen smiled. 'Guilty as charged, I'm afraid. What can I say? It

seemed only fitting.'

The Doctor went on. 'Then you began siphoning off the poor creature's temporal energy and set about recreating the world in your image. But it didn't turn out to be as easy as all that, did it?'

'Unfortunately, no. I soon discovered that rearranging historical events is like making changes to a house of cards. The slightest touch can cause a section of the house to come tumbling down. And every time I attempted to repair the damage I caused, I only made things worse.'

'And now the entire planet is embroiled in a vast temporal maelstrom, with Prague the only sanctuary,' the Doctor said. 'No wonder this city has been the epicentre of so many temporal anomalies throughout its history — you've turned it into a nexus point in time, sending shockwaves across the ages.' He shook his head in disgust. 'You're like a clumsy child playing with a nuclear weapon, Kemen. The web of time is far too delicate for a single individual — no matter how much of a genius he might be — to tamper with.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' Kemen countered. 'You're a time traveller, and right now you're interfering with *my* present.' His eyes narrowed. 'What's more, I can sense that you're not exactly human, are you? Oh, you look human enough, but your temporal aura is very different. So not only are you meddling with a time other than your own, you're meddling

with the fate of a world that's not yours. What gives *you* the right to lecture me?'

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but as much as he wanted to argue with Kemen, he couldn't find the words. He thought of the Aeronons, of the thousands of lives lost because of his intervention. What right did he have, indeed?

'But it's your unique physiology, along with your knowledge of time travel, that makes you a godsend to me, Doctor,' Kemen said. 'I'm going to hook you up to my equipment, and then with your intelligence and strength of will to direct the Moerani's power, I'll finally be able to realign the Earth's temporal field to create my perfect world!'

'You're mad!' Jamie said.

'Unfortunately, he's not,' the Doctor said. 'What he's intending might well work. If I were foolish enough to cooperate.'

'You'll be happy to help me, Doctor, I assure you.' Kemen gestured and the Death android tightened its finger on the trigger of its weapon.

Before the Doctor could react, a verdant beam of energy lanced forth from the gun's barrel to strike Jamie between the shoulder blades. He cried out in pain, grimaced, then fell to the floor.

'Jamie!' The Doctor rushed over to the boy and knelt at his side. The Time Lord's greatest fear was that one of his travelling companions —

those good people who'd put their trust in him, who helped relieve the loneliness of his long nomadic life — would die because they'd had the simple misfortunate to say yes when asked if they'd like to come along with him.

And it appeared the Doctor's fear was about to be realised, for Jamie's dark hair began to turn white, and his skin began to wrinkle and become stippled with brown liver spots. His knuckles swelled with arthritis, and his fingers curled into stiff claws.

Jamie was unconscious, though still breathing. The Doctor reached out and gently shook the boy, hoping to rouse him, but Jamie's eyes remained closed.

'As you no doubt know, there's nothing you can do for your friend,' Kemen said. 'He's received a dose of negative temporal energy strong enough to thrust him into his old age. Another shot, and he'll crumble away to dust. If you don't agree to help me, I'll order my androids to fire again. I hate to resort to such tactics, but I have a responsibility to my people, to all of history, for that matter. I hope you can appreciate that, Doctor.'

The Doctor gave Jamie a last gentle pat on the shoulder before standing and turning to Kemen. His mind was clouded with rage, and even with his powerful intellect and the self-control that came with it, it was all he could do to keep from lunging towards Kemen and

throttling

the life out of the man.

‘I’ll cooperate,’ the Doctor said, voice tight with barely repressed

anger. ‘Hook me up.’

Kemen stood on the far side of the chamber in front of a computer

console, fiddling with the controls. He spoke without looking up from his

work. ‘I’d like to tell you that this isn’t going to hurt, Doctor, but the truth

is, I just don’t know.’

The Doctor sat in the chair atop the dais, a dozen wires of various

colours and thicknesses taped to his head and the backs of his hands.

Pseudopods of synth-leather had extruded from the chair’s surface and

wrapped around the Doctor’s chest and arms, holding him fast. The

Doctor didn’t bother straining against his bonds. He knew that he could

never escape by physical strength.

Jamie lay on the floor where he had fallen, Death and Corruption

standing guard over him. The Scot remained unconscious, but even if he

were awake, he’d become too aged and frail to be much of a threat. The

Doctor watched the rise and fall of his companion’s chest, and was

worried by how shallow the lad’s breathing was. Jamie was now so old

that he might not need another blast of negative temporal energy to

finish him off. Natural causes might well do the job all on their own.

Though the Doctor could not turn his head to look at the Moerani behind him, he nevertheless sensed the creature's gentle presence. The

Time Lord's hearts went out to the poor creature. He, of all people, understood the life of complete freedom that time travel offered. For a creature such as the Moerani to be imprisoned like this, its lifeforce drained to fuel the ambitions of a misguided genius, was nothing short of

a living hell. And judging by how dimly the Moerani's light-globe glowed,

a hell that had taken its toll. It was quite possible that the Moerani was

too weak to supply the power that a complete temporal realignment would require. The creature might well not survive Kemen's latest experiment.

Kemen entered a last few bits of data into his console and then turned to face the Doctor. 'I'm ready to begin the realignment. I know you

have your doubts now, Doctor, but when I've brought utopia into existence, you'll see that I was right. Assuming, of course, you survive the realignment process. If you don't... well, rest assured that you gave your life for a good cause.'

The Doctor was about to make one last biting remark but, before he could speak, Kemen turned back to his console and flipped a final switch.

Machinery hummed to life, and the globes that surrounded the dais

began to pulsate with energy. The Doctor felt power — more power than

he'd ever dreamed could exist — surge through the wires connecting him

to the Moerani, and he screamed in agony as his mind was turned inside

out.

Not alone... not any more...

Through the pain, he heard a soft voice. No, not a voice, he realised:

a thought. One that wasn't his.

... sorry you hurt. I don't mean to hurt you...

The Doctor knew then that he was hearing the Moerani's thoughts.

Kemen's machines had connected the Time Lord to the creature

mentally as well as temporally.

... so tired. Weak. Want to sleep ... sleep forever ...

You mustn't, the Doctor thought back. Hold on! I'll find a way out of

this somehow. Just don't give up!

Only... one way out now. At least... I'll be free again...

NO!

But the Moerani didn't listen. The Doctor felt more power enter his

body, a vast tidal wave of time energy, and he understood that the

Moerani was transferring the remainder of its lifeforce to him. The

creature was committing suicide rather than endure its captivity any

longer. The agony grew exponentially, the pain beyond anything the

Doctor imagined could possibly exist.

Fix what... Kemen broke. Use the last of my strength to... to...

And then the Moerani's thought-voice grew silent, and the Doctor knew the creature was gone.

With the energy transfer complete, the Doctor's agony vanished.

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Equal measures of sorrow and rage filled the Time Lord's being, and with a thought he caused the synth-leather pseudopods encircling his body to age and crumble away to dust. He tore away the wires taped to his head and hands, and then stood.

Kemen was so intent on watching the readings on his console's monitor that he hadn't noticed the Doctor stand.

'This is odd,' the chronopath muttered. 'The energy reading is higher than I've ever seen before, but there's no indication that the temporal realignment has begun yet.'

'That's because I've only just started!' The Doctor stepped forward and placed his hands on two of the nearest light-globes. He closed his eyes, opened a psychic channel to Kemen's equipment, and gave a single mental command.

Let all be as it once was.

The agony returned as the Moerani's temporal energy poured out of the Doctor's body and into Kemen's equipment. The machinery's hum grew in volume and pitch until it seemed as if the devices were screaming in pain of their own. Sparks flew from consoles as systems

began to overload, and the stink of burning plastic filled the air.

The Doctor was aware of a sudden puzzling emptiness within him, and it took a moment before he realised that he was experiencing the absence of pain. It was over.

He opened his eyes and, though he was weak as a newborn kitten, he managed to stay on his feet as he descended the dais.

Kemen was hunched over his console, frantically working controls.

'No, no, no! It can't be! According to these readings, Earth's timestream has been returned to its original configuration!' He whirled around and snarled at the Doctor. 'You fool! You've ruined everything!'

'Not quite yet.' The Doctor gestured at Death and Corruption. A few last scraps of the Moerani's power yet lingered within him, and he used some of it to age several key components within the androids. The figures stiffened, their hands clenched their energy weapons tight, crushing them, and then — as the broken fragments of their guns fell to the floor — Death and Corruption ceased moving.

The Doctor's mouth stretched into a tired smile. 'There. *Now* I've ruined everything.'

'I still have my other androids!' Kemen said, voice high and wild, as if he were on the verge of hysteria. 'I'll summon them now, and they'll —'

'I wouldn't bother if I were you. Your androids were linked through your time-control equipment, so when I dealt with those two, I took

care

of the rest. Your android army has been reduced to scrap, I'm afraid.'

The Doctor walked over to Jamie and once again knelt at his

companion's side. The Time Lord still had some Moerani energy left. He

prayed it would be enough.

He clasped Jamie's wrist, closed his eyes once more, and channelled

temporal energy into his body. When the Doctor opened his eyes, he

was relieved to see the boy was indeed a boy again. The power of the

Moerani had reversed the aging process.

Jamie's eyes fluttered open and the Doctor helped him to sit up.

'What happened?' Jamie asked.

'Nothing much, just the foiling of the villain's plot.' The Doctor grinned.

'I'm afraid you slept through it, though.'

'You haven't foiled anything!' Kemen said. 'You've set me back quite

a way, I'll admit, but I'll rebuild my facility and capture another Moerani to

power it! And this time I'll succeed in making utopia a reality!'

The Doctor sighed as he rose to his feet. 'Utopia is an unattainable

idea, Kemen! In the end, all we can do is the best we can and hope it'll

be enough. But as you obviously don't understand this...' As he spoke,

the Doctor stepped closer to Kemen. He didn't know if he had any

Moerani energy left, but he grabbed hold of Kemen's hand and closed

his eyes, attempting to channel power into the man's mind.

The Time Lord didn't feel any energy pass through his fingers, and

when he opened his eyes, he saw Kemen staring at him quizzically.

'What in the world... Oh, I see. You're trying to use the Moerani's

power to burn the knowledge of temporal mechanics out of my mind so

that I can't rebuild.' He chuckled. 'I'm afraid it didn't work, Doctor. You

must have used up the last bit restoring your young friend to his proper

age.'

The Doctor lowered his hands. 'Can't blame a fellow for trying.'

'Step aside, Doctor. I'll deal with him.' Jamie rose to his feet, his

hands curled into fists. He approached Kemen with a dark look in his

eyes.

'No, Jamie. You know that's not the way.'

Jamie stopped his approach but he didn't relax his hands. 'But we

can't let him start again! He nearly destroyed the entire Earth!'

The Doctor looked from Jamie to Kemen, then back to the

Highlander. He was right; they couldn't allow Kemen to simply walk away

and begin anew. But how could they stop him? They couldn't walk into a

police station and tell the authorities that Kemen should be imprisoned

for attempting to rewrite the history of the world. No one would ever

believe it. The Doctor refused to kill. He believed that there was always

another way to solve a problem, if one thought long enough and hard enough. But in this case, he couldn't see how to —

He heard a soft sound then. A quiet trill, almost but not quite like birdsong, as beautiful as it was sorrowful.

Kemen frowned. 'What's that noise?'

The sound grew louder, richer, more harmonious, as if hundreds of voices were joining in the song one by one.

Jamie cocked his head to the side. 'I can't hear anything.'

'That's because you're not a chronopath.' The Doctor smiled grimly. 'It

appears our young Moerani's pod has finally located its wayward member.'

Kemen paled, 'Now' he whispered, eyes widening in fear.

'Look!' Jamie pointed to the Moerani's cube-shaped prison. The body of the time-travelling cetacean floated at an awkward angle, the creature

clearly dead. But as the three men watched, the Moerani began to fade and within seconds, it was gone.

'His family has taken the poor wee bairn home,' Jamie said. The Doctor nodded somberly. 'So they have.'

The Moerani's song continued to rise in volume until it became deafening. Even Jamie could hear it now, and the three men covered their ears in a vain attempt to shut out the sound.

Kemen suddenly screamed and collapsed to the floor. The instant the

chronopath's body struck the stone, it burst apart into a cloud of dust as

Kemen was instantly aged out of existence. With the chronopath gone,

the Moerani's singing stopped, and though the pod hadn't manifested

physically, the Doctor could sense them moving off, resuming their

eternal journey of the cosmos, carrying their lost loved one with them as

they once more plied the waters of forever.

The Doctor gazed upon the settling dust — all that remained of a man

who'd dreamed of altering history to fulfill his own vision of perfection. 'It

appears the Moerani aren't the forgiving sort.'

The two travellers walked across a grassy field towards where the

TARDIS waited for them. Jamie had suggested they remain in Prague for

a while and see the sights, but the Doctor had declined. As much as he

loved Prague, he'd had enough of it for now. Perhaps another time.

As they walked, the Doctor played a sad, soft tune on his recorder.

He was attempting to recreate the song of the Moerani, but it was

impossible to replicate on a physical instrument. Frustrated, he finally

gave up and tucked the recorder back into an inner pocket of his suit

jacket.

The world had returned to the way it should be: blue sky above, solid

ground below, a warm breeze gently stirring the grass. It was spring, a

time for renewal.

In the midst of death, we are ever in life. But the thought failed to

cheer him.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ Jamie said.

‘Do you now, Jamie? And since when did you become a mind reader?’

‘Since I’ve known you for so long,’ he said. ‘You’re thinking about what happened with the Aeronons and comparing yourself to Kemen.’

The Doctor couldn’t deny it. ‘Kemen said it himself: what gives me the right to interfere in the destinies of others? When all is said and done, am I really so different from Kemen?’

‘Yes,’ Jamie said firmly. ‘You may be stubborn at times, and you tend to think you’re smarter than you really are, but I’ve not met a man with a kinder heart or more courage. Kemen wanted to create a perfect world, but to do that, he enslaved that Moerani bairn and was going to force everyone to live as he wanted them to, whether they liked it or not. You help people, Doctor — save lives so that folk have the chance to choose their own destinies.’

The Doctor thought on his companion’s words as they continued walking towards the TARDIS.

‘But what if I make a mistake when I try to help, like I did with the Aeronons?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘Remember what you said to Kemen: we have to do the best we can and hope it’s enough. After all, no one’s perfect.’ He grinned. ‘Not even you.’

The Doctor laughed and put his arm around his young companion. ‘I suppose you’re right.’

Together they reached the TARDIS, went inside, and a moment later, engines wheezing and groaning, the blue box slowly faded from sight.

The Dragons of Prague

Todd McCaffrey

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Sarah Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan

‘What’s that noise?’ Sarah Jane Smith asked as the TARDIS hurtled through space and time to its new destination. She looked down at her side of the control console but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

‘What noise?’ Harry Sullivan asked. ‘This whole thing is noise.’

‘Don’t be rude,’ the Doctor snapped.

Harry turned back to the display he’d been inspecting.

‘What noise?’ the Doctor asked Sarah.

‘The one that sounds like an alarm clock,’ Sarah said, pointing to the TARDIS’s console.

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor, grinning cheerfully, ‘that’s the alarm clock.’

‘You have an alarm clock on a time machine?’ Harry asked incredulously. ‘Why would you have one here?’

‘It wouldn’t do me any good anywhere else, would it?’ the Doctor replied. ‘Anyway, I have more than one.’

Tut what’s it for?’ Sarah asked. ‘And how do you turn it off?’

‘It’s a reminder,’ the Doctor said, searching his side of the console carefully. With a cry of delight, he picked up an elaborately inscribed object. ‘Here it is! It’s really an orrery, not an alarm clock,’ he explained,

holding it up to their view. ‘I set it by the Prague Astronomical Clock not

too long ago, you may remember.’

Sarah examined the object — it looked like an alarm clock with too

many hands. At the top it had the standard two large bells and a clapper

which swung between them but, instead of making a consistent ringing

noise, the bells distorted every time they were struck making a weird

rising and falling ringing sound.

‘Are those planet symbols?’ Harry asked, pointing to the hands.

The Doctor gave him a silencing look that Sarah also caught — she

bit back a comment of her own.

‘Stonehenge?’ the Doctor continued. ‘No, that’s not until next

Tuesday.’

‘It looks like instead of numbers you’ve got constellations on the dial,’

Harry remarked. ‘I recognise Aries and Libra.’

‘It’s...’ the Doctor’s voice drifted off as he turned the clock around and

his face drained of all colour.

‘Draco. Mars is in Draco.’ He spoke the words softly and turned away

from the others.

Harry and Sarah exchanged curious looks but as Harry made a

motion towards the Doctor, Sarah grabbed his arm, shaking her head.

The Doctor looked up, suddenly. ‘We’ve got to make a little detour.’

‘We’re going back to Prague,’ the Doctor said. ‘In the Czech Republic. Near your time: 2012 to be precise.’

‘Do we need to be precise?’ Sarah asked.

‘Oh, very,’ the Doctor agreed, suddenly serious. He wagged a finger at her. ‘And you’re to stick close to me, both of you. When I say, "No wandering off", I’m not saying it to hear the sound of my voice.’

Sarah looked demur. ‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘Easy to say, harder to do,’ Harry remarked. When Sarah glanced sharply at him, he asked, ‘Well, how many times have we been separated from the Doctor?’

‘Not this time,’ the Doctor promised.

‘So what, are we fighting alien invaders?’ Sarah asked.

The Doctor cocked his head thoughtfully, then nodded and smiled. ‘Yes.’

The sound of the TARDIS travelling through time stopped.

‘What sort of aliens?’ Harry asked. ‘Big or small?’

‘Both.’ The Doctor told him as they stepped towards the door. ‘How are we going to fight them, then?’ Sarah asked.

‘Him,’ the Doctor corrected.

‘Him?’ Harry repeated, eyes narrowed. ‘Then there’s only one?’ The Doctor nodded.

‘So how can one alien be big and small?’ Sarah asked challengingly.

‘You’ll see,’ the Doctor told her. He frowned, then added just before he stepped out of the TARDIS, ‘Or maybe you won’t.’

Harry and Sarah exchanged exasperated looks as they followed the Doctor outside the TARDIS. It was mid-morning and the square they had arrived in was mostly deserted. The weather was brisk, mid-autumn and the air smelled fresh.

‘What are we looking for?’ Sarah asked, as something pretty caught her eye high up on the eaves of a nearby building.

‘Dragons,’ the Doctor replied, his back to her as he scanned the far horizon.

‘Well, we’re in luck, then,’ Sarah said. ‘I’ve just found one.’

‘And I’ve found another,’ Harry added, pointing, but the Doctor wasn’t looking in his direction.

‘Harry, Sarah, I’m so sorry, I’ve lead you to your doom,’ the Doctor exclaimed in horror. ‘It will be quick and painless, that I can assure you.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Sarah cautiously.

‘If you don’t move, it’ll be very quick,’ the Doctor assured her. ‘They only tease their prey when they’re moving.’

‘I don’t know how they could eat us,’ Harry said reflectively. ‘Mine doesn’t appear to be moving.’

‘They’re like cats, they tense up before they pounce.’

‘Mine doesn’t look tense,’ Sarah said.

‘They seem far too small to eat a human,’ Harry added.

‘Too small?’ the Doctor repeated, his eyes going wide. He twirled about quickly, to follow first Harry’s and then Sarah’s gazes. ‘I don’t believe it! He’s let them out!’ He turned and sprinted for the TARDIS, yelling over his shoulder, ‘Come on!’

Sarah and Harry found him hastily punching up numbers and reviewing the output on his console. ‘He’s cheated! I did get us here in time!’

‘In time for what, Doctor?’ Sarah asked.

‘Do you remember anything about the dinosaurs?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Some,’ Sarah admitted. ‘But those were dragons. What have *they* got to do with dinosaurs?’

‘Well,’ the Doctor admitted, ‘it’s more to do with what they had to do with *getting rid* of the dinosaurs. And I thought I’d got rid of the dragons!’

‘But they’re still here, aren’t they?’ Sarah pointed out.

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘Yes. Yes, they are. In full violation of their sworn oath! You are familiar with the Chicxulub Crater in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, aren’t you?’

‘Not really,’ Harry replied in a serious understatement.

‘The meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs?’ Sarah asked.

‘Only it wasn’t a meteor,’ the Doctor said. ‘It was a Drak colony ship.’

‘Drak?’ Harry repeated. ‘As in dragon?’

‘Precisely,’ the Doctor said with a firm nod.

‘So the Draks wiped out the dinosaurs?’ Sarah could just imagine the

history books having to be rewritten — but would anyone believe that the

dinosaurs' extinction had been down to a spaceship crashing into the

Earth?

'Well, not quite,' said the Doctor. 'They tried, and nearly succeeded.

Then, in their moment of triumph, their own ship was destroyed.' He

shook his head, frowning, 'They accused me of being responsible but I

was in their prison at the time. I used their misapprehension to convince

them that I could destroy them utterly and they surrendered.'

'But why would they want to destroy the dinosaurs?' Harry asked.

'They were just dumb animals and the Drak were space travellers, far

more advanced.'

'The Drak weren't more advanced,' the Doctor replied. 'Oh, they had

space travel all right but only because they stole it from the Ixx two

millennia beforehand. The dinosaurs had just about developed it

indigenously when...' The Doctor made a fist and slammed it into his

open palm.

'Wait a minute!' Harry protested. 'I may not know much about history

but you can never tell me that *dinosaurs* developed intelligence. We

would have found evidence by now, surely.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not if all the evidence was destroyed in

the nuclear winter that followed when they later became extinct.' He

grimaced. 'I won't pretend that their ideas of art and culture were

anything to be proud of — their blood rituals alone rivalled those of the

Aztecs who followed them millions of years later — but they were still a

young race and might, in tens of millions of years, have developed into

something of promise.'

'Well... okay,' Sarah began sceptically, 'but then what? Why aren't the

Drak ruling the Earth now?'

'I defeated them,' the Doctor responded. 'It wasn't easy, mind. It took

about a thousand years of negotiating, in fact.'

'So you didn't fight them all,' Harry guessed.

'No, I only fought their best, Drakos — that's their leader.'

'And how did you defeat him?' Harry asked, eyeing the Doctor. 'Aren't

dragons rather large?'

'Ah, but they pride themselves on their intellect!' the Doctor replied.

'And their honour.'

'Honour?' Sarah asked, gesturing to the front of the TARDIS and the

dragons waiting outside.

'Intellect?' Harry asked, brows narrowing. 'What, did you play a game

of chess for planet Earth?'

'Who do you think invented chess after all?'

'The dragons?' Sarah snorted in disbelief. 'But how would they make

a set? All they've got are claws!'

'Don't underestimate their claws,' the Doctor warned her. 'They are

capable of the most delicate movements. Besides, you forget spatial

claudication.'

'Claudication?'

'Like the TARDIS,' Harry added.

'It allows them to alter their shape,' the Doctor said. 'The last time I saw Drakos, he was masquerading as a young Brahmin. And, yes, we played chess for the planet. After I taught him, of course.' The Doctor smiled. 'It became a very popular game after that.'

'So you've just got to meet this Drakos and beat him at chess?' Harry asked, turning eagerly to the entrance once more. 'That's what your "alarm clock" was for? Well, what are we waiting for?'

The Doctor held up a restraining hand.

'Because Drakos is very intelligent,' the Doctor replied. Harry turned back to the Doctor and gave him a questioning look.

'How intelligent?' Sarah asked. 'He didn't beat you, did he?'

'No,' the Doctor said quickly. 'Almost.'

'Almost?' Sarah and Harry repeated in surprise.

'He won the first of the three games,' the Doctor told them. 'And when he did, he offered me a deal.'

'A deal?' Sarah said, eyes narrowing. 'Oh, Doctor —'

'He agreed to change the rules to best out of five,' the Doctor said.

'Well, that's not much,' Harry allowed.

Sarah could see from the Doctor's face what the problem was. 'But there was a catch, wasn't there?'

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘The catch was that, if I agreed and won, he would be allowed to set the next challenge.’

‘Doctor!’ Sarah exclaimed.

‘He’ll want you to toss dragons or something,’ Harry objected.

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘I was careful to set the rules such that he can only choose a challenge that a human could be expected to win.’

‘And you trusted him?’ Sarah demanded.

‘At the time, he’d never cheated,’ the Doctor said. Taken with a sudden thought, the Doctor ran around the console and began punching buttons hastily. He turned to the display to view his results. ‘Hmm, and he may not have cheated this time, either.’

‘We’re surrounded by dragons and he *didn’t* cheat?’ Harry asked incredulously.

The Doctor beckoned them to the display console and pointed. ‘Are those your dragons?’

‘Yes,’ Sarah agreed.

‘They’re rather small,’ the Doctor commented.

‘We did tell you.’

Before the Doctor could respond, there was a knock on the TARDIS’s door. The Doctor smoothly directed the external viewer to show the door.

Waiting outside the entrance was a teenage boy.

‘Drakos?’ Sarah asked.

‘No, not Drakos,’ the Doctor replied. The Doctor came to a sudden

decision, rushed to the doors and poked his head outside.

‘Yes?’ he said to the teenager.

‘I have been sent to give you your invitation.’ Sarah watched on the viewscreen as the boy smiled, handing over a small envelope. ‘You are very lucky, dinner is at seven tonight.’ His smile faded a bit as he took in the Doctor. ‘Formal attire will not be required,’ he said with a sniff.

‘Invitation?’ the Doctor asked. ‘From whom?’

‘He said that you would know him as Drakos,’ the lad said.

‘Really?’ the Doctor asked, stepping out of the TARDIS, trying to ensure that the teenager could not see inside. ‘And how would you know him?’

As they’d stepped away from the TARDIS’s doorway, Sarah and Harry could no longer hear what was being said outside.

‘Come on, Harry.’ Sarah followed the Doctor outside, Harry in tow.

‘I know him as Mr Ctislav Drak,’ the lad was saying as they stepped through the door. ‘I work for him.’

‘What do you do?’ Harry asked. Sarah could see that he was doing his best to keep his outrage at a potential traitor to mankind under control. ‘I’m a waiter,’ the boy said proudly, drawing himself up. ‘And if I do well, I may become head waiter in a few years.’

‘Waiter?’ the Doctor repeated. ‘And where would that be?’

‘At The Dragon and the George.’ He seemed surprised that they didn’t know. With a slight bow he added, ‘Bojan Novak at your service.’

He looked at Harry and Sarah curiously. ‘Are they coming too?’ he asked, gesturing to them. ‘Mr Drak said to invite your guests as well.’

‘Of course we’re coming,’ Harry insisted staunchly. ‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’ Sarah gave him a troubled look and murmured so that only he could hear, ‘It might really *be* for the world.’

The lad didn’t hear her. ‘Be prepared then for a taste of Prague such as you’ve never had in your life!’ he said. He reminded Sarah of the office junior at her old magazine: a little too eager, but also an air that, actually, he knew everything already and was only going through the motions until a time when he could take over the whole office.

‘What’s the time now?’ Harry asked, shaking his wrist and looking at his watch significantly.

‘It is half past two,’ the lad replied. ‘And if you’ll excuse me, I must return and get ready myself.’ He turned away, then back long enough to add, ‘I hope to see you there!’

‘Of course,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Give my regards to Mr Drak and tell him that I accept his invitation.’

With a final wave, the lad hurried away.

‘Back into the TARDIS, quick as you can,’ the Doctor urged, shooing Harry and Sarah back inside.

‘What is it, Doctor?’ Harry asked as soon as they were safely inside.

‘We’ve got hours to dinner and the challenge won’t be until after that.’

‘No, Harry, that *is* the challenge,’ the Doctor said, brandishing the envelope at them. He tore it open and read it quickly, grunting in satisfaction when he was done before passing it over to Harry. Sarah read it over his shoulder as the Doctor said, ‘Drakos is challenging me to a culinary battle.’

‘What, the best cook wins?’ Harry exclaimed.

‘Exactly!’ the Doctor replied. ‘He will serve his entry tonight and then I shall have 24 hours to provide mine.’

‘But, Doctor…’ Sarah didn’t like pointing out the obvious, but it needed saying. ‘You don’t cook!’

‘That’s hardly true,’ the Doctor said, affronted. ‘My bangers and mash are the delight of Gamma Upsilon Six!’ He frowned. ‘Well, they were — a hundred thousand years ago. I might have got a bit rusty, though. And I’ve never cooked for a dragon.’

‘But how can this lad talk of a Mr Drak?’ Harry asked. ‘Surely he’d notice a great big dragon in the kitchen!’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No, he wouldn’t,’ he replied. ‘Drakos will probably look like a normal human.’

‘But I thought you said that the dragons were all trapped, seeing as you won your challenge,’ Sarah observed.

‘All except Drakos,’ the Doctor corrected. ‘He’s allowed to walk the Earth in human form for a short period of time prior to the challenge.’

‘How long is a "short period", then?’ Harry wondered.

‘A hundred years.’

Harry and Sarah were silent for a moment as they absorbed yet another indication of the Doctor’s alienness.

‘So he’s had a hundred years to perfect his cuisine?’ Harry asked.

‘I don’t know about you, Doctor, but I could become pretty good in the kitchen in a hundred years,’ said Sarah.

‘Yes.’ The Doctor nodded to her with a small smile. ‘I’ve no doubt you could.’

‘But you’ve got only 24 hours. That doesn’t seem fair!’ Harry objected.

‘Well, it was in our agreement,’ the Doctor said. ‘I think some research is in order.’ He bent over the console for a moment, keying in some queries and then stood up again. ‘Happily, we’re in the right time,’ he told them. ‘I’ll want you two to help.’

‘Anything,’ Sarah said at once. Harry nodded vehemently in agreement.

‘Right, then,’ the Doctor said briskly. ‘The first thing you two need to do is find the nearest internet café. Harry, I’ll want you to research everything you can on Mr Drak and his establishment, paying particular attention to his menu. Sarah, I’ll want you to look for anything out of

the

ordinary, anything that you think I might want to know. Think edible.'

'Edible, right,' Sarah said.

'Well, then, you'd best be off,' the Doctor said, waving them towards

the door.

'But, Doctor, this is Czechoslovakia,' Harry objected. 'The Soviets will

have a field day if they find me here!'

'No, it's the Czech Republic, Harry,' the Doctor said. 'We've

discussed this already.'

'Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, it's still part of the Soviet Union,'

Harry objected. 'I can't think that the communists will be all too happy to

find a British lieutenant wandering around —'

'Don't worry, Harry, you won't get in trouble,' the Doctor told him. 'The

Czech Republic is part of the European Union, your allies.'

'And the Soviets didn't object?' Harry asked in surprise. 'They were

mad enough back in '68, as I recall.'

'They've mellowed since,' the Doctor said. 'In fact, there is no Soviet

Union.'

'The Berlin Wall?' Harry asked.

'Gone.'

'What? How? Did we fight another war?'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'It was one of your species's brighter moments.

The people of the two Germanys — now one — got their

sledgehammers and battered the wall down themselves.'

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'Well, I'll be!' Harry exclaimed.

'That's amazing!' Sarah added. 'So the whole world is at peace, is it?'

The Doctor's face fell. 'No, not exactly,' he told them. 'Look, it's best not

to get too involved. Just go to the internet café and do your research.'

'Doctor,' said Sarah, 'what is an internet café anyway?'

'It's a place where people sip tea or coffee while they browse the

internet on their computers,' the Doctor explained.

'Well, Doctor, we've a bit of a problem, then,' Harry said. 'Seeing as

we haven't *got* a computer and they're a bit hard to haul around.'

'No, not any more,' the Doctor said. 'Many people use laptops. I

expect they'll have laptops set up at the café.'

'Laptops?' Sarah repeated blankly, looking down at her thighs. 'They

implant computers in their *bodies*?'

The Doctor drew breath to respond, then shook his head sadly. 'Why

don't I come with you and set you up?'

In the café, Harry was browsing the internet with a look of bliss on his

face. Sarah sat next to him at her own computer. She'd seen the internet

before during her travels with the Doctor, but it still amazed her — so

Harry's open-mouthed wonder didn't surprise her.

'I want one of these,' he declared.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘But you’ll have to wait about 15 years in your time.’

Harry’s face fell. ‘I’ll forget you said that.’

‘Please,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘That’s odd, Doctor,’ Sarah said. ‘There’s an article here about pollution in the river.’ She followed a few more hyperlinks and frowned.

‘Not everything is right in the future,’ she said, looking up to the Doctor.

‘Apparently there’s been a large amount of pollutants dumped into the river. Fish are dying and there are strange reports —’

‘Reports of what?’ the Doctor interrupted, his curiosity piqued.

‘Reports of missing people, of half-eaten bodies,’ Sarah told him sombrely.

‘Has your friend been violating his agreement?’ Harry wondered, looking up from his laptop.

‘Harry, Sarah, switch computers,’ the Doctor said. To Harry, he continued, ‘I want your opinion on the causes.’

‘Right and I’ll look at menus,’ Sarah said, diving into her new project with relish. ‘Harry, I’m more than happy to leave you with the bodies.’

‘Right,’ Harry said absently, his attention immersed in his new problem.

‘Meet me back at the TARDIS in two hours,’ the Doctor said, turning to leave. Sarah was so engrossed in looking through the search engine’s results, she only registered the Doctor’s words after the café’s door

rattled shut.

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‘You’re late,’ the Doctor said when Sarah and Harry got back to the TARDIS. Harry had to laugh: the Doctor was dressed in a formal suit, looking the height of elegance, marred only by his hat and scarf.

‘You’re not going like that?’ Harry asked, giggling.

‘Of course,’ the Doctor said. ‘You two can get dressed as soon as you’ve told me what you’ve found.’

‘Your friend Drakos has become quite the chef,’ Sarah began. ‘His restaurant has won awards from all over Europe.’ She cocked her head at him. ‘We’re very lucky, there’s usually a three-month waiting list. He serves a variety of dishes, including several traditional Czech dishes like roast suckling pig but he’s also known for his Chinese and Indian dishes.’

‘Well, he should be, he spent enough time in both countries,’ the Doctor said.

‘I’d say it’s very likely that he’ll serve the very best to you, Doctor,’ Sarah concluded. ‘Five star, cordon bleu haute cuisine.’

‘You’ll have a hard time beating him, then,’ Harry guessed.

‘Maybe,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Sarah, why don’t you go and get dressed?’

‘Anything to spare myself from Harry’s forensic findings…’ she said as she left.

‘So, Harry, what did you find?’

‘Well, Doctor, I doubt that your friend Drakos is involved.’

‘Really, why so?’

‘Well, because the remains found were more dissolved than chewed,’

Harry said. ‘I guess I’d be right that your dragon friend would swallow his

prey whole? Yes? Then this is a different problem. There were traces

found of various pollutants and some acids normally associated with

snails or slugs.’

‘Snails?’ the Doctor asked, his interest piqued. ‘That could be our

solution, dragons love snails!’

‘What, escargot in garlic sauce?’ Harry snorted.

‘Exactly,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Who do you think discovered them?’

Tut your friend Drakos would want them by the truckload, if that were

the case,’ Harry objected.

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘I’m sure that they’ve become too

expensive even for him to consume in any satisfying quantity. Snails

would be quite a delicacy.’

‘They would now,’ Harry agreed. ‘There was an invasion of snails

some years back until the invention of this new flesh-eating slug

repellent.’

‘Flesh-eating slug repellent?’ the Doctor repeated thoughtfully.

‘Wiped out all the snails in the Czech Republic,’ Harry said. ‘They

import theirs from France and they cost a fortune.’

‘What do you know about this flesh-eating slug repellent, Harry?’ the

Doctor asked.

‘I learned about it because it’s the principal pollutant in the river,’

Harry said. ‘Everyone was so desperate to get rid of the snails, they

dowsed their gardens with it and the run-off went into the river.’ He shook

his head. ‘Nasty stuff it was too — ate the flesh right off the poor things!’

‘Harry!’ the Doctor exclaimed.

Harry wondered if he’d upset the Doctor.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you not to join us for dinner.’

‘Doctor, why?’ Harry objected. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘And you didn’t,’ the Doctor told him firmly. ‘But I’ve got a job for you

and I’m afraid it will take all night.’

‘Well... all right,’ Harry replied. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘First, you should get several large containers of salt,’ the Doctor

began.

The Dragon and the George was, like many of the better restaurants

in Prague it seemed to Sarah, located in the cellar of a very old house.

‘It’s a pity about Harry,’ Sarah said, as she and the Doctor followed

their waiter down the stairs.

‘Harry has important business, believe me,’ the Doctor said. ‘And I

want you to keep your eyes open while we’re here.’

Sarah was suspicious. ‘Why?’ she asked. ‘You don’t expect Drak to try something do you?’

‘I think Drakos already *has*,’ the Doctor replied. ‘So he may try again.’

‘What, do you mean with the little dragons?’ Sarah asked. ‘Didn’t I tell you that they were set out by some sort of graffiti nut called Point?’

‘You did,’ the Doctor said. ‘But don’t forget that the tip of a lance is a point and we’re eating in "The Dragon and the George".’

‘Ah, Doctor!’ an unctuous deep voice called from the far end of the cavernous room. Sarah followed the voice to spot a well-built, slightly elderly, dark-haired, dark-eyed man: Drak, surely. He moved sinuously towards them, like a snake dancing.

‘You’ve changed,’ Drak observed as he eyed the Doctor up close. ‘So have you,’ the Doctor replied.

Drak turned his attention to Sarah. Sarah noticed that Drak’s eyes seemed to be infinite in their depth. ‘Ctislav Drak at your service,’ he said to her with a brisk nod of his head. He turned back to the Doctor. ‘You are aware of the nature of the challenge, correct?’

‘Yes, I am,’ the Doctor replied. He gave Drak a brisk smile. ‘In fact, you might say that I’m relishing it.’

Drak barked a short, sharp laugh in return. ‘Let me show you to your table, and then I must return to the kitchen. I must be certain that this will be your most memorable meal.’

‘I’m sure it will be,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘One way or another.’ Sarah

pursed her lips nervously.

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‘Don’t worry, Sarah,’ the Doctor whispered to her. ‘I’m certain that everything will be fine.’

‘But you don’t know how to cook,’ Sarah said.

‘It’s not the cooking, it’s the cuisine. Let’s enjoy our dinner —’

‘It might be our last.’

The Doctor smiled at her and tapped his nose meaningfully. ‘What?’ said Sarah. ‘Do you know something that I don’t?’

‘I certainly hope so,’ the Doctor replied flippantly. ‘After all, I am rather much older.’

Sarah’s bad mood did not last through the hors d’oeuvres; they were simply too wonderful. The salad was fairly plain fresh greens with a marvellously spiced balsamic vinegar dressing but, as Sarah observed, ‘Nothing you can’t find in a decent restaurant in London.’

‘I’m sure it will be the main course which will take our breath away,’ the Doctor replied.

He was correct. For the main course they were offered a choice of traditional Czech venison goulash, rabbit fillet medallions, grilled piglet or a grilled roll of venison on juniper berries with toasted wild mushrooms in marjoram sauce.

‘Which would you recommend?’ the Doctor asked Drakos, who had

appeared at the table himself to offer the selections.

‘I would not presume to judge your tastes, Doctor,’ Drakos replied smoothly with just a hint of a smile, although it was not reflected in his eyes, which remained still disturbingly unfathomable.

‘If I might, Mr Drak,’ Bojan, who had been their waiter throughout the meal, interjected meekly to his employer.

Drak regarded Bojan for a moment, then inclined his head slightly. ‘I would be interested in your suggestion, as well, Bojan.’

Bojan smiled and turned to the Doctor and Sarah, although it was obvious to both that his attention was more on Sarah than the Doctor.

‘The pride of place at The Dragon and the George must go to our venison roll,’ he said.

‘Well, then, if you suggest it,’ Sarah said. She looked over to the Doctor. ‘I think I will also put my faith in your waiter,’ the Doctor said to Drakos. ‘Very well,’ Drak said. ‘We shall have the dish out for you shortly.’

As the chef and waiter left, Sarah turned to the Doctor. ‘Why is it that we can speak Czech but we don’t know what their names mean?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Bojan Novak, what’s it mean?’ Sarah said. ‘And, for that matter, what does Ctislav mean?’

‘Sarah, I’m surprised at you,’ the Doctor responded. ‘You had access to the internet all afternoon and you didn’t think to look?’

‘I was rather busy with other things,’ Sarah replied in a tight voice.

‘Well,’ the Doctor replied, ‘it happens that I asked myself the same

question. Bojan means War. Novak is like the British name, Newman.’

‘And Ctislav?’

‘That was the most reassuring,’ the Doctor replied. ‘In fact, it was only

when I discovered the first name Drakos is using that I decided to accept

his invitation.’

Sarah raised an eyebrow at him questioningly.

‘Ctislav means "glorious honour",’ the Doctor told her.

Sarah sat back thoughtfully until their main course arrived.

The main course was elaborately presented, served by two waiters

simultaneously who lifted the lids off the plates to reveal still steaming

food. The food itself was better than the presentation. Neither Sarah nor

the Doctor found any time to talk until they had finished the very last

morsel.

‘That was amazing,’ Sarah said. ‘I don’t usually even like venison.’

‘I have to admit I’ve never eaten better,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And that

is saying something.’

‘I am pleased to hear you say that,’ Drak said, his voice coming from

just behind Sarah, causing her to start suddenly — she hadn’t heard him

approach. ‘There is still dessert, cheese and port to come.’

‘Please bring whatever you think best,’ the Doctor said.

Drakos nodded. ‘I shall do that.’

He sounded very pleased with himself.

‘Doctor,’ Sarah said. ‘I don’t see how you can top this.’

‘Not to worry, Sarah,’ the Doctor replied serenely. Sarah could not contain her incredulity but, as Bojan brought their dessert, she contented herself with eating it slowly, almost like a condemned person.

‘Really, Sarah,’ the Doctor chided her, ‘you must have more faith in me.’

‘The Doctor is incredibly well-trained in almost all things,’ Drak added, once again appearing behind Sarah. ‘He is particularly good at chess. I advise you never to wager with him.’

‘Don’t tell me that you think our wager wasn’t fair!’ the Doctor protested.

‘No,’ Drak agreed. ‘No more than you can say that this wager isn’t fair.’ The Doctor nodded in agreement. ‘Tell me,’ he asked after a moment, ‘what will you do if you win?’

‘You mean, when I win,’ Drakos corrected him. He frowned thoughtfully. ‘Well, obviously, I believe that there will be a change of management involved.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘But how drastic?’

‘My people have suffered for millions of years,’ Drakos replied as if that were enough.

‘Weren’t they all in stasis?’ the Doctor asked. ‘How could they suffer there?’

‘They have not been allowed their freedom,’ Drak responded.

‘As I recall, they weren’t too worried about depriving others of theirs,’ the Doctor remarked dryly.

‘That was my fault,’ Drakos said. ‘I was young and brash, not given to much thought.’

‘And now?’

‘Now, perhaps,’ Drakos replied, ‘I am bit wiser.’

‘I think you are,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘Port,’ Drakos said curtly, turning to Bojan who rushed off. ‘And then, Doctor, perhaps you will agree that I have won?’

‘Don’t I get a response?’

‘Of course,’ Drak replied suavely. ‘You have 24 hours from... let’s be fair and say from after you depart my establishment to provide me with a dinner that surpasses the one I have presented you.’

‘And you will be the judge?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Of course,’ Drakos replied. ‘After all, weren’t you the judge of my meal?’

‘Quite,’ the Doctor agreed. He and Sarah spent the last of the evening in silence, sipping port until the Doctor was ready. As they rose to leave, Drakos appeared at the door.

‘When shall I call upon you, then, Doctor?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘It is now nearly nine o’clock,’ the Doctor observed. ‘Why don’t you call upon me at a quarter to nine tomorrow evening?’

‘Very well,’ Drak replied with a thin, satisfied smile. ‘Although if you think to surpass my meal with an offering lasting only 15 minutes, you are quite optimistic.’

‘Always,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Goodnight, Bojan,’ he called to the waiter. ‘Good night, Doctor, Sarah,’ the young waiter called back.

‘So what are you going to do, use the TARDIS to learn the secrets of haute cuisine in one night and prepare a sumptuous feast?’ Sarah asked as soon as they were out of earshot, safely ensconced in a cab back to the TARDIS. ‘Although how you can expect to satisfy Drakos in 15 minutes —’

‘Sarah!’ the Doctor interjected in a shocked voice. ‘Use the TARDIS? That would be cheating.’

‘Right, and you still couldn’t come up with something that could win in just 15 minutes,’ Sarah said.

‘I think you’ll be surprised,’ the Doctor responded. ‘I just hope Harry’s had the sort of luck we need.’

‘And if he hasn’t?’

‘Then we shall hear dragons roar once more upon the Earth.’

The cab stopped outside the TARDIS, the driver looking perplexed.

‘It’s all right,’ Sarah assured him. ‘We’ll walk from here.’

Harry looked up as they stepped inside. He was stacking several

large bags of salt beside the door.

‘All right, Harry?’ the Doctor asked cheerfully.

‘Couldn’t be better, Doctor,’ Harry agreed. ‘Although how you —’

‘Shh, Sarah will appreciate the surprise all the more later,’ the Doctor said.

‘Surprise?’ Sarah asked suspiciously.

‘Indeed,’ Harry agreed, not able to keep a smug look from his face.

‘But will your friend Drakos be surprised too?’

‘It doesn’t matter if he’s surprised,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Just that he’s defeated.’

‘What, are you going to sprinkle salt on him and pickle him?’ Sarah asked waspishly, feeling irritated that she wasn’t in on the joke.

‘Not him,’ Harry corrected. He turned to the Doctor. ‘But I’m worried about the timing. What time did you tell him?’

‘I told him a quarter to nine, that’s just 15 minutes before the end of my 24 hours.’

‘That might work,’ Harry agreed. ‘But are you sure about what’s needed to entice them?’

‘You’re the one who’s supposed to be sure, Harry,’ the Doctor replied.

‘Are you?’

Harry grimaced. ‘To the best of my ability.’

‘That’s all we can ask for,’ the Doctor replied.

‘We’re betting the human race on Harry’s abilities?’ Sarah asked, glancing from the Doctor to Harry.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed simply. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, we’ve had quite a night and we’re going to need our sleep.’

‘What? Aren’t we going to cook?’ Sarah demanded.

‘No.’

‘And what about tomorrow?’ Sarah persisted.

‘Well, I think tomorrow we should have a look around Prague,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I’m sure there will be many splendid sights to see.’

‘I’d like to see the Chapel of the Holy Cross, myself,’ Harry said, entering into the game and smiling at Sarah’s rising disbelief.

‘And the picture gallery at Prague Castle, don’t forget that,’ the Doctor added.

‘And, Sarah, I expect you’ll want to see their garnets,’ Harry suggested. ‘Yes, indeed,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Prague is renowned for its garnets.’ Sarah looked back and forth between the two who were so obviously enjoying themselves at her expense before stomping to the back of the TARDIS.

‘I shall turn in,’ she told them haughtily.

The Doctor and Harry were still in the same light-hearted mood the next morning, much to Sarah’s continued annoyance.

‘This is the future of mankind we’re talking about!’ she declared as the

Doctor asked her to pass the tea. ‘And you and him —’ she glared towards Harry ‘— are acting like it’s only a schoolyard prank.’

‘No, no, it’s quite serious,’ the Doctor told her, though his eyes twinkled.

‘Couldn’t agree more,’ Harry added quickly. ‘Really, Sarah, I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. The Doctor’s come up with a foolproof plan.’

‘Foolproof?’ Sarah repeated dubiously. ‘I’ve yet to see any signs of it.’

‘In fact,’ the Doctor said, ‘what I like most about this plan is that it will

kill two birds with one stone, as it were.’

‘But the timing’s critical,’ Harry reminded him.

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Although, with the salt, we can afford to have Drakos be a bit late.’ He frowned thoughtfully. ‘Which reminds me,

Sarah, I’ll need you to pick up a few things.’

‘Such as?’ Sarah asked archly.

‘Nothing onerous,’ the Doctor assured her. ‘I think some paprika, the hot variety, some olive oil —’

‘Extra virgin, surely?’ Harry interjected.

‘Yes, extra virgin,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘And what else, garlic?’ Sarah demanded. ‘He’s not a vampire, you know.’

‘Garlic is just the thing,’ the Doctor said. ‘And of course he’s not a

vampire; he's a claudicated dragon.'

'Claudicated?'

'Yes, like the TARDIS,' the Doctor replied. 'He's bigger on the inside than on the outside.'

Harry frowned. 'So if he comes into the TARDIS, he'll —'

'Get bigger, yes,' the Doctor agreed. 'In fact, he'll resume his normal shape.'

'You're going to invite him into the TARDIS?' Sarah asked.

'Naturally,' the Doctor replied. 'You wouldn't expect us to feed him out in public, would you?'

'You're going to feed him?' Sarah said. 'As a dragon?'

'Of course,' the Doctor responded. 'It won't work otherwise.' He finished his tea, and stood up. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I shall see the sights of Prague.' He gestured to Harry. 'Coming, Harry?'

'Right, and you're going to leave me to do the scullery work?' Sarah demanded hotly.

'Look, Sarah, Drakos will doubtlessly be watching me,' the Doctor told her. 'He is too chauvinistic to consider you much of a threat, so he'll probably not pay you any attention —'

'Unless he gets hungry,' Sarah muttered.

'Even if he gets hungry,' the Doctor corrected. 'Besides, he'd expect you to do the scullery work as you so succinctly phrased it, so we'd best not disappoint him.' The Doctor glanced at his watch. 'We'll meet you

back here for lunch, although nothing will happen until it gets dark.'

'I suppose I wouldn't mind so much if I thought I was doing anything useful,' Sarah grumbled.

'You are,' the Doctor assured her fervently. 'Your job is the most important of the lot.'

'Oh, and Sarah,' Harry added as he followed the Doctor out of the TARDIS, 'be sure to pick up some scraps.'

'Scraps?'

'Yes, think like them,' Harry told her. 'Bits of old lettuce, and maybe some leftover meat, come to think of it.'

'You wouldn't say that if you saw the table Drakos set last night,' Sarah objected. 'Dragons are very picky eaters.'

'Who was talking about dragons?' Harry replied, turning to follow the Doctor.

'We'll know soon enough,' the Doctor said as night fell over Prague. Contrary to what they'd told Sarah, neither the Doctor nor Harry had taken in the sights of Prague. They had, rather, taken a long stroll along

the Vltava as it ran through the centre of Prague, stopping at various points along the river.

Now they were back once more, the Doctor with a bucket full of the scraps Sarah had collected. They had left her dicing the garlic and promised to be back before Drakos.

‘This was where the latest attack took place,’ Harry said as they approached their last stop.

The Doctor breathed in a huge lungful of air. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it smells right.’

Harry looked at him questioningly.

‘Earthy,’ the Doctor told him. He started spreading the contents of the bucket from the river back towards the street.

‘Harry,’ he said, ‘I need you to go and tell Drakos that our rendezvous has moved.’

‘He’ll still meet us at the TARDIS?’ Harry asked.

‘Yes, but I’ll bring the TARDIS to that spot right there,’ the Doctor said, pointing to a nearby corner.

Harry looked at the spot critically, then nodded. ‘Yes, that should be about right.’

‘Good, off you go then,’ the Doctor told him, setting off back towards the TARDIS.

‘Doctor,’ Harry called as he left. ‘Are you sure this is going to work?’

‘We can only hope, Harry,’ the Doctor replied. ‘We can only hope.’

‘Doctor, what are you doing?’ Sarah asked as she entered the control room of the TARDIS, alerted by the unmistakable grinding, groaning sound of time travel. ‘You’re not leaving Harry, are you?’

‘No, not at all,’ the Doctor replied with a grin. ‘In fact, we’re joining

Harry.'

'Oh, that's a relief.'

The TARDIS finished its translation in space with a final grinding noise.

'Now, in a few moments I'm going to go outside to help Harry. When I'm gone, I'll need you to take the salt and pour it out on the TARDIS entrance,' the Doctor said.

'Pour out the salt?'

'Exactly,' the Doctor agreed. 'In a zig-zag line, leaving a width just a bit wider than a human.'

'All right, but why?'

'To slow them down,' the Doctor replied.

'Them?'

'Yes,' the Doctor said. 'I expect there'll be three of them, maybe four, but it won't matter. Use the paprika on the first, the olive oil on the second, and the garlic on the third.' He pointed at the three large buckets that he'd had Sarah fill with the required ingredients. 'But you must be sure to slow them down, as they'll be after you.' He stood at the entrance to the TARDIS and sprinkled the last of the scraps on the floor.

'Doctor —' Sarah began, perplexed, but the Doctor held up a hand, forestalling her question.

'Just trust me, Sarah. You'll see when the time comes. Oh, and don't think they won't move fast.'

‘I would expect it from a dragon,’ Sarah replied.

‘I wasn’t talking about dragons,’ the Doctor told her with a quick smile.

Then he spun around and, with one final wave, left the TARDIS.

When Drakos met Harry and the Doctor outside the TARDIS, it was precisely quarter to nine. Sarah stood just inside the TARDIS’s door, out of sight but able to hear what was going on.

‘Where is your companion, the lovely young lady?’ Drakos asked as he met them.

‘She’s inside,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Waiting for you.’

Drakos face fell. ‘Oh, surely, Doctor, you don’t think to tempt me —’

‘Why don’t you go in and see for yourself?’ the Doctor replied. ‘Harry and I will follow.’

‘If this is a trick—’

‘It would not be honourable, and so I would forfeit,’ the Doctor finished smoothly. Carefully, he opened the TARDIS door and called, ‘Now, Sarah!’

Drakos snapped one suspicious look back at the Doctor and then peered inside the TARDIS.

Sarah just barely had time to react to the Doctor’s warning, throwing the paprika, olive oil and garlic in carefully aimed tosses at their targets

before Drakos reacted.

In a moment that Sarah would never forget, the sinuous man's head and neck expanded, nearly exploding from his body, stretching out to become the huge head and neck of a large black dragon as he lunged forward in three quick bites —

Sarah screamed, she couldn't help herself.

But Drakos was not lunging towards her. Instead, the dragon's jaws snapped over the three large snails that were swiftly moving around the zig-zag salt course that she had laid down. In a flash, the garlic-covered snail was gone, then the olive-oil covered snail and finally the one dowsed with paprika. And then, in the same instant, Drakos was standing in the doorway, no longer half-man, half-dragon but all human again.

'How? How?' Drakos demanded of the Doctor.

'How was the meal?' the Doctor asked him. Was it to your satisfaction?' Drakos's tongue, looking draconic again, licked his lips and disappeared into his mouth.

'Never, in a thousand, no a million years!' Drakos said, shaking his head in disbelief. Then he broke into a huge grin. 'Doctor, that was magnificent! Please tell me that there are more!' He looked around hopefully. 'And what were they?'

'Flesh-eating snails,' the Doctor responded. 'I'm afraid some of the

local pollutants have had a rather odd effect on the local snails.'

'Oh, but they were marvellous!' Drakos replied. 'And there might be more?'

'Undoubtedly there are more,' the Doctor agreed. 'If my guess is correct, there may be a small colony nearby.'

A glutinous gleam flared in Drakos's eyes. 'A colony?'

'About our wager,' the Doctor prompted.

'You win,' Drakos replied enthusiastically. 'There is no doubt in my mind.' Again he licked his lips with a draconic tongue. 'Such a feast! You must know that I bought most of the escargot supply this summer and I can never get enough. They're far too small for my tastes.'

'I had noticed,' the Doctor replied. 'Which is why I thought this particular culinary offering might meet your approval.'

'Indeed,' Drakos agreed fervently. 'I have not tasted such in well over a million years.'

'The pollutants doubtless added a piquancy,' Harry guessed.

'You've no idea,' Drakos replied feelingly. He turned back to the Doctor. 'But you've won. What new restrictions will you place upon me?'

'It seems to me, Drakos, that perhaps we can come to an arrangement,' the Doctor told him.

Drakos arched an eyebrow suspiciously. 'An arrangement? Like the last time?'

'No,' the Doctor replied. 'You have always proven yourself

trustworthy. Can you, on your honour, tell me whether you think that the

Drak and humans might someday coexist?'

Drakos looked around him, at the sights of Prague, at Harry, at Sarah

inside the TARDIS, and sighed. 'Your apes are often very stupid,' Drakos

admitted. 'But when they rise above that, they are almost worthy of

existence.'

'I see,' the Doctor said. 'Well, then, here are my new terms: you may

remain here in human form for the next ten thousand years.'

'You will give me ten thousand years of being a chef?' Drakos asked,

surprised at the Doctor's largesse.

'In human form,' the Doctor said. 'But also —'

'Ah, a catch!'

'I think you'll like it. You will ensure the flesh-eating snails represent

no danger to the local humans. And I'll ask you to guard against similar

threats in the future.'

'Hmm,' Drakos murmured, stroking his chin with a hand. Finally, he

held his hand out to the Doctor, who shook it. 'Agreed.'

Back inside the TARDIS, Harry asked the Doctor, 'Are you really

going to meet him again in ten thousand years' time?'

'I already have,' the Doctor replied.

'And?' Harry prompted.

‘The Draks have their own world and an interstellar reputation as the best chefs.’

‘Really?’ Harry repeated in surprise.

‘Well, I’ve got a question too,’ Sarah said sourly.

‘What, Sarah?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Who’s going to clean up all this mess?’

Omegamorphosis

Stel Pavlou

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor

‘The meaning of life is that it ends.’

Franz Kafka

One morning, the little boy awoke from anxious dreams to discover a man sitting on the edge of his bed.

‘Who are you?’ the little boy asked with bewilderment.

The man replied, ‘I know I am, but what are you?’

The little boy was taken aback. *What* was he? What an odd question. He thought about it, but try as he might he couldn’t find an answer.

Suddenly aware that he had trouble making any sounds at all and that he had a very sore throat indeed, the little boy protested gingerly, ‘I don’t understand.’

‘No,’ the man mused, wistfully. ‘I don’t suppose you would.’

The little boy made an effort to sit up, but his arms were thin and weak. He pushed the bedclothes down a bit and managed to arrange a pillow behind his back. His skin was sallow and clammy, the fine fluff along his arms matted and lifeless.

‘How did I get here?’ the little boy asked quietly. ‘I was sick. I remember eating something. I think it was cheese. It was very tasty. And

then there was this pain in my neck. It really hurt and I couldn't breathe.'

The little boy rubbed his nape. 'Are you a doctor?'

'Of sorts,' the man replied. When he spoke he rolled his tongue in a peculiar fashion. The little boy found his brogue accent very amusing.

'Say something else!' he laughed. 'Where are you from?'

'Oh, here and there.' The man got to his feet. With his kindly face and dark swept hair he gazed out of the little attic window, across the rooftops to the glittering spires of the old city. He wore a tweed jacket and his woollen jumper was covered in questions marks. 'Now,' he said

when he looked back down upon the child. 'What are we going to do about you?'

'You should give me some medicine,' the little boy explained knowledgeably. 'That's what doctors are supposed to do. You ask me what the matter is, you put a glass thingy in my mouth —'

'A thermometer?'

'Yes. A therm-oh-mee-ter... One of those. And you take my temperature. And then you give me some medicine. That's what doctors

do.'

'Why do I get the feeling you've been through this before?'

The little boy thought for a moment. 'My master,' he said firmly, 'gave

me lots of medicine. And treats. And sometimes he'd have me run

around for him.'

The little boy could see that the man's curiosity was clearly piqued.

'Run around? Doing what?'

The little boy threw his bedclothes back in excitement and tried to

stand upright. He naturally wanted to hunch forward onto his hands and

feet, but with a little practice he rose instead and took his first faltering

steps, as though he were an infant who had never walked before in his

life.

He tottered to the window. 'Out there,' he pointed from spire to spire.

'My master had a whole route mapped out for me, all around the city.'

The little boy gazed affectionately at the spires of the old city,

shimmering as though affected by some ancient and altogether unearthly

energy.

The Doctor watched with quiet fascination.

The little boy's attention seemed to ebb and flow in sympathy with the

peculiar coruscating phenomenon outside until quite suddenly he cocked

his head to one side. 'Somebody's coming,' he said.

It was only when the noises grew louder that the Doctor too heard all

the commotion. A woman and a young girl were arguing somewhere

inside the house. Then from the foot of the stairs heavy footfalls began to

march up towards them.

The Doctor glanced down at the child with amusement. ‘You have very good ears.’

‘Yes, I have, haven’t I?’

‘Rather big too.’

The boy clutched self-consciously at his lobes just as the footsteps stopped right outside the door to his shabby attic bedroom.

The handle rattled. The lock cracked back, and the door was thrown wide open.

Mrs Samsa had all the bluster of an irate woman, but all the bearing of someone who absolutely terrified. ‘Professor, I warned you that if you were to lodge in my house, you were not allowed up here!’ Yet no sooner had she stepped squarely into the room, than she caught sight of the little boy by the Doctor’s side. ‘Oh, good grief, you found him.’

The little boy in his blue striped pyjamas hid behind the Doctor for cover.

The Doctor’s face darkened and his voice rolled like thunder. ‘Who told you you could disturb me while I tend to your son!’

Mrs Samsa’s breath caught in her throat. ‘My what…? He’s not —’

But the Doctor cut her off. He laid his hands protectively on the little boy’s shoulders and shunted him forward. ‘Callum is very sick.’

Mrs Samsa recoiled, drawing a hand up to her mouth in barely concealed horror. She took a deep breath and gazed at the little boy.

‘You’ve given it a name?’

The little boy glanced from one adult to the next, uncertain as to what he should do. ‘I’m… I’m afraid,’ he said.

‘No need for that,’ the Doctor replied, but his gaze never wavered from the woman. ‘Perhaps we should all just go downstairs and enjoy a nice dinner together. Like a *real* family.’

The nervous Mrs Samsa clutched at the folds in her skirt. ‘But that’s when —’ she held her eyes tightly shut, the dread rolling off her shoulders Mr Lubic tends to return.’

‘Oh, goody.’ Little Callum beamed with joy. ‘Mr Lubic used to bring me to and from my master.’

The Doctor was delighted at this new bit of information. ‘I think I’d like to meet this Mr Lubic.’

The blood drained from Mrs Samsa’s face. She backed out of the room with a lurch.

‘Well, if you don’t like Mr Lubic,’ the Doctor asked impertinently, ‘why invite him at all?’

Mrs Samsa became rooted to the spot at the top of the staircase outside. The Doctor watched her nervous hand as she gripped the banister. She was so frightened. With her hair up in a pin at the back, he could see the stress forming red blotches all over the skin around her neck. ‘It’s not a question of liking him,’ Mrs Samsa replied. ‘He comes

anyway. He always comes.'

Little Callum's eyes once again darted from adult to adult. 'Mr Lubic died,' he explained innocently.

'I'd have thought dead men would find it difficult to keep dinner appointments,' the Doctor suggested.

'Not Mr Lubic,' the little boy said. 'Perhaps he just doesn't like being dead.'

'There seems to be a lot of that about,' the Doctor remarked idly.

'Mind how you go,' he advised.

Callum glanced down to see that his bare toe hovered dangerously close to a little wooden mousetrap at the foot of his bed.

He eased his toe away, without dislodging the mechanism or its cheese, but it was only then that he noticed that he was in no danger at all. 'Don't be silly,' he replied as the Doctor led him out of the room. 'The trap's already been sprung.'

Dinner was set for seven o'clock. Little Callum sat on one side of the sturdy wooden dining table, munching on a piece of bread. Mrs Samsa and her daughter, Flora, sat opposite him. Places were set for two guests, one at either end, but after listening to the ticking of the antique grandfather clock for a further hour, there was still no sign of Mr Lubic.

'Well,' Mrs Samsa said with great relief. 'Perhaps he's decided to give us all a miss this evening.'

‘How long has he been visiting?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Since the beginning,’ Mrs Samsa replied quietly.

‘The beginning of what?’

The young Flora Samsa became animated. ‘Since the evil came to the city. You must have seen it. Though I think it’s always been here,’ she added, regarding Callum with utter disdain. ‘Great-great-great-great-great-great-great-uncle Gregor turned into an insect once,’ she announced, ‘and in this very house too.’

‘I thought that was just a story,’ the Doctor remarked.

‘When Great-uncle Gregor’s friend wrote a story about it, nobody believed him. But it’s true.’ She sneered. ‘And now we have him,’ she said. ‘And dead Mr Lubic.’

Mrs Samsa stood up and began serving the food, commencing with carving up the meagre roast chicken. ‘Flora, don’t be so rude,’ she admonished.

‘It’s true,’ Flora said as she helped herself to some roast potatoes and continued her musings. ‘Did you know, Callum, that a British man named James Henry Atkinson invented the snapping mousetrap in 1897? I read about it. I think it’s amazing.’ she said, ‘that three hundred years later and Mr Atkinson’s mousetrap is the only thing that hasn’t evolved.’

The Doctor leaned up against the mantlepiece. ‘Oh, I don’t know

about that.'

The girl scowled at her mother's house guest. 'I'm not sure I like you,

Professor.'

'I'd hate to think that you weren't sure,' the Doctor replied.

The Doctor glanced out of the window at the darkened street outside

but still it didn't appear that they were going to receive the enigmatic Mr

Lubic this evening. Reluctantly, the Doctor sat down. He went to pick up

his knife and fork when he suddenly realised that Mrs Samsa had taken

his hand in hers, had bowed her head and was closing her eyes.

'Would you care to say Grace, Professor?' Mrs Samsa asked. 'What's

Grace?' Callum asked.

'People say a prayer,' Flora explained impatiently, 'when they want to

thank God for the food they are about to eat.'

'Why?'

'We just do.'

'Oh. Well, how do I pray?'

'You don't,' the girl said snottily, 'because you're not a person. You

shouldn't even be here.'

'Flora!' Mrs Samsa snapped. 'That is *enough*!' She snatched her

hand back and fiddled with her napkin. She picked at the food on the

serving dishes and scooped a little out for herself. 'I think I shall be very

glad to leave this city.'

Taking her fork, Mrs Samsa leaned forward to skewer a slice of chicken when a chill wind cut through the house.

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Mrs Samsa shivered involuntarily and rubbed her arms. She glanced around for the source of the draught. When she could find none, she tried once again for the roasted chicken, but when she glanced down at her hands this time, she was mesmerised by what she saw. The wrinkles in her skin at first began to fade making her hands appear supple and young again; but no sooner had that joy arrived, when it was replaced with despair as the wrinkles reappeared but deeper this time, and rippling up past her wrists.

Horrified, Mrs Samsa threw the fork down at the dish as though she had just discovered a great hairy spider was crawling up her arm. However, when her eye caught sight of where the fork landed, the really nasty surprise was suddenly all too apparent.

One by one the slices of poultry on the serving dish began to knit themselves back together again. As the roasted skin sealed over the joins, small brownish spikes sprouted across its length, pushing through and unfurling to reveal soft downy feathers.

The children were fascinated. ‘What’s happening?’ Callum exclaimed.

As another wisp of chill air secreted into the room, the Doctor leapt to his feet excitedly. ‘Good heavens, have you never seen a chicken

unroast before?'

The bizarre metamorphosis continued apace. Soon a glistening beak

forced its way out of the stunted neck, and clawed feet began protruding

from under the stuffing.

It was all too much.

Mrs Samsa buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook

violently and tears soon began to squeeze out between her fingers. 'This

family is cursed!' she sobbed. 'Cursed!'

But the bizarre spectacle did not end there. As the once roasted bird

raised itself up off the serving dish, it clucked at the would-be diners

before hopping down from the table in a panic and fleeing from a sudden

sharp rapping on the front door.

Mrs Samsa, her cheeks stained with tears, looked up in horror, as the

strange boy jumped up and ran to the door. 'Mr Lubic!' he cried. 'Mr

Lubic!'

'No, Callum!' warned the Doctor, but it was too late. The little boy had

already negotiated the bolt.

A dark shadow loomed in the doorway as the icy grip of a winter flurry

tore through the house.

As the figure stepped across the threshold, spring blossoms rode the

frozen eddies in his wake. Crimson blades from frozen petals that sliced

at the skin of the onlookers.

‘Mr Lubic,’ Callum exclaimed, jumping up and down excitedly. ‘I was afraid you had forgotten about me!’

The Doctor watched as walls of shimmering air billowed along the street behind the strange visitor. As they blew their way through the

narrow streets of the old city, so the trees that lined their route bent to the will of the winds; shedding as though it were autumn one moment, and budding as though in spring the next.

As the formerly roasted chicken dashed across the floor in panic and shot between the visitor’s legs, it clucked its last when it hit a vortex and exploded, along with the visitor, in a cloud of dust.

Mrs Samsa and her daughter screamed and hid under the table.

For the Doctor, however, it was the first thing that had made any sense. ‘Of course,’ he muttered to himself. ‘The time winds…’

The street outside was a little calmer now; the changing winds a little less insistent. He stepped up to the doorway and took a good look at the swirling dust where a man and a chicken had once stood.

Callum was perplexed. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘What happened to Mr Lubic?’

The Doctor assessed the boy and his ever curious gaze. ‘He’s gone,’ he replied, thoroughly disinterested in that particular course of inquiry.

Will he be back?’

‘Who knows,’ the Doctor mused, reaching into his pocket. ‘Maybe never. Maybe in five minutes.’ The Doctor grabbed his umbrella from the stand by the door. ‘It really all depends on the weather.’

Callum was still none the wiser.

‘How are you feeling?’ asked the Doctor. ‘That was quite a blast just then.’

‘I feel fine,’ little Callum responded sincerely.

‘Curious. You shouldn’t be.’ And with that the Doctor pulled a small glowing object from his pocket, held it up to Callum’s face. With a quick press of a button its tip glowed and the whole thing let out a series of high-pitched chirping sounds.

The Doctor studied the results briefly.

‘Is that your thermometer?’

‘Of sorts.’ The Doctor slipped the instrument back into his pocket and drew the little boy’s attention to the happenings outside. ‘You’re looking at layers of time, my boy,’ the Doctor explained. ‘Think of the skins of an onion. As the time winds blow, the difference in time between where we are now and where that tree is, is already over a hundred years. Mr Lubic aged and died just stepping through the front door. Doubtless if the winds blow in the other direction he’ll be picking himself up and heading off to work again.’ The Doctor bent over and checked on Mrs Samsa

still

cowering under the table. He smiled. ‘Or popping round for another

dinner. Might I suggest, Mrs Samsa, next time serving something that in

life was a little less... animated.’

But it was what was happening away from the table and out on the

street that had the Doctor intrigued the most.

‘The question is what are the time winds doing here, I wonder? They

shouldn’t exist outside of the time vortex. Unless... No, even he wouldn’t

be mad enough, surely...’ The Doctor spun on his heel and once again

examined the little boy with his inscrutable gaze.

Little Callum took a step back, self-consciously. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You’ve felt the time winds before, haven’t you? Many times I’m willing

to bet.’ The Doctor stepped outside, licked his finger and held it up.

‘Direction: north-north-west. Speed: three knots. Outlook: highs of the

Middle Ages, with a slight chance of the Crusades, leading to a touch of

the Fifth Millennium Artifice by morning.’

Callum followed in his wake. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to find your so-called "master". He’s going to want to know

all about you.’

‘But you don’t know the way.’

‘Don’t I?’

‘What if you get lost? I can help,’ he said. ‘I won’t get in the way. I’ll be

as quiet as a mouse, I promise.’

The streets of the old city thronged with people despite the lateness

of the hour. But as the Doctor made his way purposefully through the

bustle, it was clear that these were an uneasy mix of people.

Modern Czechs kept their heads bowed and hurried to their

destinations, refusing to acknowledge the confused milling of the others.

The others didn’t belong.

Venetian traders from the seventeenth century roamed in rotten rags,

alongside travelling Vikings heading for Byzantium to make their fortune

as Varangian guardsmen. Twenty-first-century businessmen wandered

in wide-eyed confusion, while Jewish children from the ghetto of the

Second World War scampered about excitedly. All looking like they had

just climbed up out of the ground; the Babel of language was fierce, each

voice desperate to know how they had come to be where they were and

why the world had changed.

Yet the Doctor could sense the unmistakeable hand of a single

intelligence, silently guiding them all in ways that none of them were

aware of. They walked in specific paths, following specific routes, like

insects following a trail.

Little Callum stuck to the Doctor’s coat-tails. ‘If everyone has stopped

being dead,' he asked in amazement, 'I wonder where they went?'

'When?'

'When they died.'

'Like an afterlife?'

'Yes. Do you think there's a heaven?'

'That's a question that has consumed greater men than me. But they all agree Heaven would have to be a place outside of time and space. And as a Time Lord, I'm rather attached to those two ideas. Do you think such a place exists?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Why not?' the Doctor asked in all seriousness, clicking the tip of his umbrella on the shiny cobblestones as he walked. 'You can answer that question as well as anyone. Where did *you* go?'

The little boy pulled up short in fright. He eyed the Doctor suspiciously. 'I didn't go anywhere,' he replied emphatically. 'I've never been dead.' The Doctor looked at him pointedly. 'Are you sure about that?'

'Yes!'

The Doctor mulled over the little boy's answer but was not terribly convinced. He resumed walking, his nose firmly pointed up in the air.

'How's that neck of yours?' he called back casually over his shoulder.

Little Callum rubbed at his nape like he had when he first woke up and reluctantly followed on behind. ‘I don’t see what that has to do with anything.’

‘You don’t? Tell me, young master Callum, have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?’

The little boy shook his head. ‘But I know what I look like.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re an ordinary little boy. Correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then tell me,’ the Doctor demanded, tipping the point of his umbrella at the nearest shop window. ‘What kind of a face is that?’

The Doctor and the little boy stood in front of the shop window and gazed at their reflections in the glass. The Doctor obviously looked remarkably like the Doctor, except all of the question marks on his sweater now appeared backwards and rather resembled the tails of a pack of cats, all lost behind the hedgerows of its knitting.

Little Callum, however, looked rather different from what he had clearly expected. Instead of a flat, angled, human face, his was more pointed. His mouth began almost exactly were his nose ended, with no philtrum, like normal people; instead his features just seemed to converge in the middle. Across his cheeks lay a fine dusting of fuzz, and around his nose, longer hairs protruded. His eyes, though dark, were

large like saucers and further set apart than any ordinary boy's would ever be. His ears too were nothing like a normal boy's. They were as large as the Doctor had said they were, with furry tops that flapped down over the holes.

Callum reached up and gently probed his own features. The Doctor had been right all along. 'What am I?'

' *Mus musculus sapiens*. The future of the common mouse. Thirty-five million years into the future to be exact, the mouse will have evolved into the smartest creature on planet Earth, granted if it hasn't already.'

Callum seemed to think this was all some kind of very unfunny joke and said so. 'I don't even understand what you're saying to me,' he

protested.

'Of course you do. You're not stupid. Look around you,' said the Doctor. 'All this false rejuvenation is just a trick. A memory of youth in matter form, stretched over decaying bodies.'

'Matter has a memory?'

'Of course!' The Doctor clicked his umbrella on the cobbles once again and resumed his stroll with Callum in tow. 'When two creatures decide to have children, their genetic code is mixed together and bits of each of them end up in the child. Blue eyes, silly teeth. Memories. The genetic codes of the creatures of this planet contain the memories of

what every creature once looked like millions of years ago. Why, if the

circumstances were just right, if such a place existed that could naturally

channel elements of the time vortex, clay men might suddenly come to

life, or somebody might even wake up to discover they'd devolved into

an insect.

'Perhaps, with enough clever guesswork, somebody else could take a

creature today, say something as benign as a common mouse, and work

out what it will probably look like in a million years from now. But if you're

really clever,' the Doctor mused as they rounded the next narrow corner,

'you don't have to calculate anything, you let time do the work for you, let

it show you what's to come. Imbue living matter with the very essence of

the time vortex itself.'

Callum was alarmed. 'What would that do?'

'In theory it could create a being that would live forever.'

The Doctor's eyes probed the skyline, darting from building to

building, searching. 'Ah,' he said, instantly recognising something in the

distance. 'There it is.'

Little Callum peered into the gloom but couldn't see a thing. 'What are

you looking at?' he asked.

‘The resonance boundary,’ was the entirely unhelpful reply.

On the outskirts of the old city a five-hundred-year-old Austro-Hungarian fusilier staggered past the Doctor and Callum, thoroughly confused.

‘Is this the way?’ he asked shakily, pointing into the gloom ahead.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor replied gravely. ‘Yes, that’s the way.’

The soldier nodded his thanks and trudged on into the dark, stepping through the curtain of shimmering air, only to have his limbs crack and tear from his torso, his hands crumble and his final remains topple into the piles that had preceded him.

Little Callum, upset to see so many dusty bones became frustrated.

‘Why is my master killing them?’

‘He can’t kill what’s already dead,’ the Doctor chided. ‘It’s one thing to infuse the time vortex into flesh, living or dead. It’s quite another to get it to stay there without help. Whoever feels compelled to cross this

boundary and survives is what your master is looking for.’

They watched as two more figures, drawn to the darkness and back to their master, stepped across the threshold of the resonance boundary and crumbled back out of existence.

‘Well,’ the Doctor announced. ‘I think it’s time we went to see your

master, don't you?'

Little Callum recoiled in fright. 'Won't I be killed too?'

'Nonsense,' the Doctor reassured him, resting a hand on the little boy's shoulder. 'Remember Mr Lubic? The time winds didn't harm you then. Why would they harm you now?'

Still the little boy appeared fearful. 'You promise nothing will happen to me?'

'I think you're exactly what your master has been searching for,' said the Doctor.

The little boy took a deep breath, and because the Doctor had been such a loyal friend, walked towards the shimmering air.

Immediately it made his hair stand on end. 'It doesn't hurt,' Callum explained with relief. 'But it's making my skin tingle.'

The boy excitedly picked his way through the rotten bones and only when he was well clear did he turn back briefly to address his friend. 'I made it!' he cheered. 'I'm alive!'

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed warmly. 'You're alive.' But only an adult would have detected the bitter-sweet tinge to his voice.

The Doctor watched and waited as the little boy raced off into the darkness yelling for his master.

It didn't take long before a familiar cold chuckle echoed through the night air.

The Doctor made his way down to the isolated building at the end of

the road and peered through one of its filthy windows.

Callum stood before an imposing figure with gloss black hair and a neatly trimmed goatee beard. The Master regarded his prize with gimlet eyes. It was just as the Doctor had quietly suspected. He slipped inside the building and stepped out of the shadows.

'Omega was quite mad, you know,' the Doctor announced. 'Brilliant — but mad. Even Rassilon thought so.'

The Master's gaze refused to waiver from the boy. He seemed entirely unsurprised. 'I have what I came for, Doctor. Thanks to you.'

'And turning a dead mouse into a living boy is what you came for, is it?' The Master treated the indignity of the question with contempt. 'The function of life is to go on.'

The Doctor shook his head at such an obvious misstatement. 'The function of life is to reproduce and *die*,' he corrected.

Little Callum beamed proudly. 'Then I am better than my function.'

'Oh, my poor boy.' The Doctor sighed. 'Didn't you ever wonder why

your master was so intent on having you exceed your function?' The Doctor turned his attention squarely back on his fellow Time Lord. 'When was the transfer supposed to take place, *Master*? When does your consciousness get to replace the one inside this indestructible little boy?'

Callum looked for an explanation but the Master took an angry step

towards the Doctor instead. ‘Let’s see how you react when you’re faced

with *your* final regeneration.’

The Doctor quickly ducked for cover behind one of the many heavy

machines that stood between them. ‘Oh… look,’ he said, probing the

room for booby traps. ‘There’s really no point in us arguing like this. Did

you really think you’d get away with it, without someone noticing? The

moment any of us first enters the Time Vortex we become inextricably

linked to it. We fuse! Did you really think a simple resonance field would

stop any of us from noticing that something was very wrong? We’re Time

Lords! The whole of Gallifrey felt it! Omega’s theory that he could take

that fusion a step further and imbue matter with it was the ramblings of a

man who’d tinkered with one too many supernovae.’

The Master’s lip curled. ‘As you can see,’ he said proudly, ushering

Callum towards the open door of his own TARDIS, ‘you’re quite wrong.’

The Doctor ducked behind another heavy machine, pulling wires and

cables from their sockets as he went.

‘You’re wasting your time, Doctor, I’ve already disconnected my ship.’

The Doctor laughed nervously in response. ‘Using your ship to induce

the time winds. Quite clever.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re confident, then, that you succeeded?’

The Master decoupled the last of the spindles and manifolds that stretched from deep inside his TARDIS and powered his elaborate contraptions, and hurled them at his feet in reply.

The Doctor smiled impishly. ‘I guess that’s that, then. Pity. With barely a minute to get away before the Lord President has you in chains you won’t be sticking around to gloat about how you did it.’ Only when the final plug was pulled, did the Doctor step out of the shadows, holding up his sonic screwdriver. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘You’re not the only one who can play with resonance fields and time winds. I wonder what would happen to the boy if I were to turn this off?’

The Master looked down at the smile on little Callum’s face, and at the sudden realisation that came with it. He had been tricked.

‘You’re getting desperate,’ the Doctor chided. ‘Prone to mistakes.’

The Master shoved the child from the doorway like discarded rubbish.

‘What does it possibly matter to you if I live a little longer?’

‘It matters when your existence comes at the expense of any other creature; living or dead,’ the Doctor replied bluntly.

But there the conversation abruptly adjourned as the Master’s TARDIS winked out of time, to be resumed later, perhaps in a week or

perhaps in a thousand years. In any event, a conversation that would

continue as though without interruption, as only Time Lords were apt to

do.

The cobbled streets of the old city were properly quiet on the stroll

back to Mrs Samsa's house. The Doctor and Callum talked of the future,

about what the world would be like when humans had departed and it

was the turn of mice to rule.

'I wish I could see it,' Callum confessed.

But the Doctor's gaze seemed haunted now. It wasn't what the

Master had had in store for his would-be vessel that troubled him the

most. It was that this humble mouse had been given a glimpse of a

better tomorrow, and would have to be content with knowing that no

matter whether he lived his old life again or not, that bright future for his

entire kind did not include him.

Tucking Callum up in bed one last time, the kindly Doctor sat on the

edge of his bed, asked him to look up, and with the flick of the wrist

switched his sonic screwdriver off.

'But you're a doctor,' Callum said, already feeling the sharp pain

returning to his little neck as the resonance field faded and the time

winds seeped from his body. 'Doctors are supposed to fix things.'

The severe look upon the Doctor's face was betrayed only by the

anguish in his eyes. He patted the small boy's hand and felt his weak

little pulse, gently slip away. 'I am fixing things,' he said softly. 'Go to

sleep.’

And as the little boy glanced down at the tiny wooden mousetrap still sat by the foot of his bed, he felt curled claws replacing what had once been his fingers. He felt long whiskers sprouting on his cheeks around his nose. He scratched at the bedclothes, and he went to sleep.

And like all good mice he dreamed of cheese.

About the Authors

MIKE W. BARR has contributed to some of pop culture's most enduring

series, including *Sherlock Holmes, Star Trek, Star Wars, Doc Savage,*

The Shadow and *Batman*. He's also created some, including the comic

book series *Camelot 3000, Batman and the Outsiders, The Maze*

Agency and *Mantra*. In 2003 he published the *Star Trek* novel *Gemini*.

He has written a book on science fiction comic books of the Silver Age,

to be published by TwoMorrows. He lives in a house with too many cats

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LEE BATTERSBY is the multiple award-winning author of over fifty

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Lyn Battersby, a bunch of kids and a house full of weird things.

GARY A. BRAUNBECK is the author of nearly two hundred short

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PAUL CRILLEY is a Scot living in South Africa with his partner and their

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KEITH R. A. DeCANDIDO's previous *Doctor Who* fiction includes

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Star Trek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, World of Warcraft, StarCraft,

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STEPHEN DEDMAN is the author of *The Art of Arrow Cutting, Shadows*

Bite, A Fistful of Data, Foreign Bodies and more than a hundred short

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manager of a science fiction bookshop, fiction editor of *Borderlands*

magazine, editorial assistant for *Australian Physicist* magazine,

experimental subject and used-dinosaur-parts salesman. He lives in

Western Australia, and always hoped that his *Doctor Who Technical Manual* would come in useful someday.

PAUL FINCH, an ex-police officer and journalist, is now a full-time TV and movie scriptwriter. He cut his literary teeth penning episodes of ITV's crime drama *The Bill*, but he's no stranger to prose either. To date, he has had five books and nearly three hundred stories and novellas published on both sides of the Atlantic, mostly in the horror, fantasy and sci-fi fields. His first collection, *Aftershocks*, won the British Fantasy Award for 2002, while his novel *Cape Wrath* was short-listed for the Bram Stoker Award that same year. He is currently working on three horror movies, including a big-screen adaptation of *Cape Wrath*. Paul lives in Lancashire, northern England, with his wife Cathy and his two children, Eleanor and Harry.

ROBERT HOOD, who lives in Wollongong, Australia, has written many science fiction and horror stories since he saw his first Doctor Who episode in 1963. After a sporadic apprenticeship of a decade or so, these stories began to appear in magazines and anthologies in Australia and elsewhere, and have continued to do so ever since. Many of them can be found in the collections *Day-dreaming on Company Time, Immaterial: Ghost Stories* and the forthcoming *Creeping in Reptile Flesh*. Other books include the novel *Backstreets* and the *Shades* series of

supernatural thrillers. Robert also co-edited *Daikaiju!: Giant Monster Tales*.

BRIAN KEENE's books include *Ghoul, The Rising, City of the Dead, The Conqueror Worms, Terminal* and many more, several of which are slated for film and video-game adaptations. His short stories have been adapted into graphic novel format. Brian lives in the backwoods of Pennsylvania with his wife and dog (who is almost as cool as K-9).

KEVIN KILLIANY lives in Wilmington, on the coast of North Carolina, with Valerie, his wife of over a quarter of a century, and their three children. His *Star Trek* credits include three appearances in the *Strange New Worlds* anthologies and two volumes of the *Starfleet Corps of Engineers* eBook series (*Orphans*, included in the *Grand Designs* compilation, and *Honor*). Kevin also writes source book and web content for FanPro and WizKids Games. *Wolf Hunters*, his first novel, was published by Roc in November 2006. When not writing, Kevin is a case manager with a community services agency and a minister. He is currently working on his second novel.

PAUL KUPPERBERG is the author of the novels *Crime Campaign,*

Murdermoon and *JSA: Ragnarok*, the Star Trek S.C.E. novella *Sargasso Sector*, and the young adult novels *Wishbone Mysteries: The Sirian*

Conspiracy (with Michael Jan Friedman), *Hey, Sophie!* and *Powerpuff Girls: Buttercup's Terrible Temper Tantrum*. He has also written over seven hundred comic book stories for characters such as Superman Vigilante, Power Girl, Masters of the Universe and dozens more, and created the comics *Arion Lord of Atlantis, Checkmate* and *Takion*. In addition, Paul has written on-line web animation, the syndicated *Superman* and *Tom & Jerry* newspaper strips, the feature *Trash for 2000 AD* magazine, humour and parody for Marvel's *Crazy Magazine*, colouring books, short stories for various fantasy and horror anthologies and more than a dozen young adult non-fiction books on subjects ranging from history and science to biography and pop culture. By day, Paul is senior editor of *Weekly World News*. He lives in Connecticut with his wife Robin and son Max.

MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL is a professional puppeteer who moonlights as a writer. Originally from North Carolina, she lives in New York or Iceland. She owns a marionette, built in 1938 by the National Marionette Theatre of Prague, and used its face for this story. Mrs Kowal is a graduate of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp and is on the editorial board of *Shimmer* magazine. Her short fiction appears in *Cosmos, Strange Horizons* and *Cicada*.

STEVE LOCKLEY and **PAUL LEWIS** have been writing together for more than ten years. They are the authors of the novel *The Ragchild* and the novellas *King of All The Dead* and *The Ice Maiden*. They have also written dozens of short stories and a novel for children, *The Quarry*. They are currently completing a horror novel for teenage readers, *The Bloodstone*, and are trying to find the time to work on other stories, novellas and novels. They live with their families in Wales. This is their first *Doctor Who* story but they hope it won't be their last.

TODD McCAFFREY, the son of fantasy author Anne McCaffrey, is a science fiction writer. He started the continuation of his mother's best-selling *Dragonriders of Pern* range in 2003, and now contributes solo novels to the series. Todd has worked as a computer programmer, published serveral short stories and written other original pieces.

JAMES A. MOORE is the author of over a dozen novels, including the *Serenity Falls* trilogy and most recently *Harvest Moon*. Before getting to work on his novels, he did a few stories for Marvel Comics and more than a few supplements for White Wolf Games series of roleplaying games. He lives in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife Bonnie.

STEL PAVLOU makes stuff up for a living. So far he's made up two

novels, *Decipher* and *Gene*; a movie, *The 51st State*; some short stories; and a collection of other noodlings. This is the second time he's made something up for *Doctor Who* — he has previously had a story included in 2006's *Short Trips: The Centenarian*, and will also be in the forthcoming *Short Trips: Snapshots*. You'd think they'd know better by now. Stel is currently adapting *Rendezvous With Rama* for Morgan Freeman and David Fincher.

CHRIS ROBERSON's short fiction can be found in the anthologies *Live Without a Net, The Many Faces of Van Helsing, Tales of the Shadowmen, Vols. 1 and 2, FutureShocks* and *Forbidden Planets*, as well as in the pages of *Asimov's, Postscripts* and *Subterranean Magazine*. His novels include *Here, There & Everywhere, The Voyage of Night Shining White* and *Paragaea: A Planetary Romance*, and he is the editor of the anthology *Adventure Vol. 1*. Roberson has been a finalist for the World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction, the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and twice for the Sidewise Award for Best Alternate History Short Form (winning in 2004 with his story *O One*).

STEVEN SAVILE (editor) has edited a number of critically acclaimed anthologies and collections, including *Redbrick Eden* and, most recently, *Elemental* for Tor Books in the US, as well as *Smoke Ghost & Other Apparitions* and *Black Gondolier and Other Stories*, the collected horror

stories of Fritz Leiber. Steven is also the author of the Von Carstein Vampire trilogy, *Inheritance, Dominion* and *Retribution*, set in Games Workshop's popular Warhammer world, and has re-imagined the blood-thirsty celtic barbarian Slaine from *2000 AD* in a new trilogy of novels for Black Flame. Steven has written for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as well as his own novels and short stories, including *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos) and *Angel Road* (Elastic Press). He previously contributed to *Short Trips: The Centenarian*. He was a runner-up in the British Fantasy Awards, and a winner of a Writers of the Future Award in 2002.

LUCY A. SNYDER's writing has appeared in publications such as *Farthing, Masques V, Chiaroscuro, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *Strange Horizons*. She is also the author of *Sparks and Shadows* from HW Press.

JAMES SWALLOW is a novelist and scriptwriter, creator of the *Sundowners* series of streampunk westerns and the only British writer to have worked on a *Star Trek* television series. His credits include the *Doctor Who* audio drama *Singularity*, the *2000 AD* plays *Dreddline, Jihad* and *Grud is Dead*, and *Space 1889: The Steppes of Thoth*. His short fiction appears in the *Short Trips* collections *Dalek Empire* and

Snapshots, and the *Bernice Summerfield* anthologies *Something*

Changed and *Collected Works*.

BEV VINCENT's first book, *The Road to the Dark Tower* (NAL, 2004), an

authorised companion to Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series, was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award. He is a contributing editor with *Cemetery Dance* magazine and has published over forty short stories in magazines and anthologies such as *All Hallows, A Dark and Deadly Valley, From the Borderlands, Blue Religion* (edited by Michael Connelly), *Into the Dreamlands*, and *Apex Digest*. His script for the short film *Stephen King's Gotham Café* won Best Adaptation at The International Horror and Sci-Fi Festival.

TIM WAGGONER's novels include *Forge of the Mind Slayers, Darkness Wakes, Pandora Drive, The Thieves of Blood*, the *Godfire* duology, *Like Death*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street: Protégé*. He's published close to eighty short stories, some of them collected in *All Too Surreal*. His articles on writing have appeared in *Writer's Digest, Writers' Journal* and

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Writing Popular Fiction programme.

SEAN WILLIAMS writes for adults, young adults and children, and is the

author of over sixty published short stories and 22 novels, including *The*

Hanging Mountains, The Resurrected Man and *Saturn Returns*. His

uniquely Australian fantasies have drawn comparisons to China Miéville,

Neil Gaiman and Ursula K. Le Guin, while his space opera collaborations

with Shane Dix earned them the title of 'Niven and Pournelle of the

twenty-first century' from scifi.com. Multiple winner of Australia's

speculative fiction awards, a *New York Times* bestseller and judge of the

Writers of the Future Contest, he lives with his family in Adelaide, South

Australia. His story in this collection is for Sebastian Yeaman, who came

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